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PROLOGUE: Rise of the Civilization

[image]

Content warning for graphic depictions of violence, animal injury, and animal death. Read with care.

It was in the gathering dark of twilight when the first blasts hit. Laelaps was on a walk with his human, a pleasant little stroll. It was a routine walk; dusk setting in, Jim getting antsy while cooped up in his office, Laelaps, in turn, becoming antsy as well. The family wished them a good walk, wished them well, covered Laelaps in pets and loving strokes that made his tail sweep through the air, back and forth.

The dusky air felt pleasant on Laelaps' fur. Not thick, nor chafing. It wafted around his grey body as he trotted alongside Jim, who kept pace in time with him. Laelaps examined the trees while they walked-- they were naked, exposed to the chill of winter. Jim was humming to himself. The leash was dangling between them, gold collar a little loose. Jim forgot the harness again, a sign that all was normal. Laelaps hadn't the slightest of feeling that something was off.

In the distance, Laelaps could smell home. It was a warm, musky smell. There was a waft of something cooking in the air, and he had wondered if Marianne was preparing something for supper. Before a couple of weeks ago, Jim was the one to cook, Marianne being away from home and all. Marianne smelled of sand and blood, but very distantly. There was a strange look in her eye when she came home that day. It unsettled Laelaps. The family, however, paid no mind. Humans were strange in that regard.

Their family was tight knit. Shawn was Jim and Marianne's son, and Laelaps' main provider of kibble, peanut butter, and belly rubs. Laelaps' didn't want to let his *canis lupis familiaris* instincts get the best of him, but Shawn was a bit of a favorite. Shawn was a good

kid, always looking out for his mother and father. There was very little raising of voices in the house, even from a juvenile like Shawn.

As they turned the street, the scent grew stronger. Marianne was definitely cooking. And Jim let her, despite expressing a passion for cooking himself. Jim was a selfless man, and Laelaps could vaguely pinpoint why. There was a permanent crease in Jim's brow, and he always reeked of stress. But having been brought along to Jim's little lectures, Laelaps saw firsthand the kindness of his human, the way he paid it forward to his pupils. Jim simply liked to give, but never to take.

The first explosion hit the home a few doors down from Jim's. It went up in flames, billowing in stark red clouds, shaking the ground beneath their feet. As they stumbled, and Laelaps' vision blurred, he heard Jim let out a scream, and something in humanspeak that he couldn't decipher. It had a harsh tone, an expletive. Jim hadn't taught Laelaps that word, whatever it was. Jim scrambled back onto his two feet, barking more curses, and snagged Laelaps' collar, tugging him close.

[image]

"*Stay*," Jim said, stern and clear. "You stay *right here*." Laelaps understood that command, at least.

And Jim bolted off, towards the explosion, leaving Laelaps' leash limp in the gravel. Laelaps wanted to run after him, but his legs were boarded to the ground. Instead, he barked as loud as his lungs could squeeze out, as if to yell like a human.

Another blast hit a house a few blocks down, behind Laelaps' line of vision. He whipped his long face around, and heard humans wail, *saw* humans running like hell while their homes collapsed on themselves. Laelaps looked up at the sky, and large black bird-like creatures were circling the area akin to how buzzards would circle rotting kill. He had seen silverish birds cross the skies a few times, but never like this. These metal-birds scoured, like ghosts, round and round the vicinity, as if to set off the next explosion. Laelaps yearned to run away.

He could still see Jim through the sifting smoke. Jim was darting around the flaming houses, and Laelaps assumed he was searching for signs of life. The next thing Jim did was run to their house, the family's house, *Laelaps'* house. The fire was beginning to spread, dangerously close to their home. *Get out of there, Jim!* Laelaps wanted to scream, cursing under his breath that he was a damn dog and couldn't do a goddamn thing. The door opened and Marianne stumbled out, clutching Shawn's shoulders, both visibly shaken. Laelaps howled, which caught the attention of his three humans, and they caught his eye.

The next explosion threw Laelaps off his paws and onto the gravel nearly half a block away from where he was standing. A tree broke his landing, knocking the breath out of him. His limbs went limp, but he struggled to fight off the blackness that was creeping in the corners of his eyes. He knew he couldn't move, and that something inside him was broken. A couple of ribs, most likely. Laelaps tried to heave a breath but his lungs screamed and that made him scream, too. Laelaps' ear was folded on top of his head as he lay on his side, and he could hear very clearly both the cries of humans and the barks and caterwauls of their animals. The black waves he had been so desperately attempting to fight had won the battle, and he shut his eyes.

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The first thing Laelaps heard when he had awakened were loud shrieks, unfamiliar of any creature he'd ever come across. It took him a minute to realize that they were sirens from the vehicles that took humans away when they were ill or suffering-- Jim didn't teach him the word for those, either.

His eyes were crusted with soot, and they stung when he opened them fully. He probed all four of his legs to make sure none were broken-- he'd be a dead dog if they were. Thankfully, all of his bones but a couple of ribs were fine. Laelaps could get by with that.

Laelaps was wobbly on his feet, but at least he was walking. Walking where, he hadn't a clue. Smoke was everywhere, in his eyes, in his lungs, in his pores. He wafted through it, quietly pleading for another soul out there who could help him find his

family. He hobbled along where the gravel kept leading him, which petered out into a concrete street. He prayed no screeching vehicles were approaching, and he stepped foot onto it.

"Jim?" Laelaps couldn't help whispering in dogspeak. He could speak a few words of human, but his accent was so garbled from his thin tongue and sharp teeth and lack of proper lips that he gave up ever trying to say anything in it. Instead, he let out a howl. All he got in response was a howl back from another dog. At least there were signs of life, but those weren't the signs he was looking for.

He couldn't see a damn thing, and smelling was out of the question what with all the smoke. He jolted when a distant boom rung in his ears; the explosions were still going on. How long had he been unconscious?

"The humans evacuated, if that's who you're looking for," someone said nearby. It was in dogspeak. "Well, the ones that are still alive, anyway."

Laelaps' legs crumpled beneath him. It hadn't occurred to him that the explosion that sent him flying had killed his humans. He didn't want that to be true, but he put two and two together.

His jowls were cracked and dry when he opened his mouth. "How could you smell me through all this smoke?"

"I'm a bloodhound. I can smell just about anything," the other dog mused, making a strange moaning noise. "Wait... wait a minute. I can't see, but... Laelaps? Is that really you?"

Though Laelaps didn't recognize the voice of the bloodhound, he knew how and why the bloodhound recognized *him*. Laelaps was the talk of the town, the smartest dog in the whole country, whatever that meant. He had stints on what humans called "television" where he would perform tasks for treats and praise. He didn't think much of it, but apparently solving block puzzles and knowing two hundred-or-so human words was something to marvel at. All the dogs on his block knew him, but he never cared to learn who they were.

It took a moment for Laelaps to respond. "Yes, it's me." He realized he was croaking the words out. "My humans are dead. Do you know where the living ones evacuated to?"

There was no reply. Laelaps heard pawsteps thumping, growing distant, until he couldn't trace them anymore. Then, the pawsteps resurfaced-- this time, several of them.

"It's Laelaps! He's alive!" cried the bloodhound, and many voices sounded in rejoice. The smoke was beginning to clear, finally. Laelaps could make out the shapes of at least ten dogs. Dread pooled in his belly, hot and unpleasant.

"Thank God!"

"Laelaps!"

"What caused this, Laelaps?"

"Where'd all this come from?"

Laelaps wished they would all shut up and leave him alone. Grieving was something they were preventing him from doing, so he had no choice but to stand up and face them.

In truth, Laelaps had no idea what caused this disaster. Nor did he care to ever find out.

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As the smoke cleared, more and more dogs toddled after Laelaps as he wandered aimlessly away from the chaos. He could not mourn for his family-- slain; again, Laelaps had no intention of searching for the cause of the destruction --so he turned to getting as far away from ground zero as physically possible.

"What's gonna happen to us, Laelaps?"

He didn't want to answer that question, simply because he had no answer for it. All he wanted was some water, a warm place to sleep, his family again.The poor saps following him could drop dead; he had no obligation to take care of them all of a sudden. Was it

because they thought he was smart?

Laelaps didn't think of himself as very intelligent, not at all. Solving a couple of puzzles for mostly-beef-flavored treats proved nothing. He aspired to be as intelligent as a human, though he knew that wouldn't happen, couldn't happen. It's not that he was jealous of humans-- they were a nasty, violent species --but he admired their intellect. The ability to use tools, create and utilize technology. If dogs had the brain capacity of humans, they would be the perfect specimen.

A chihuahua caught up with Laelaps and padded beside him. He looked at the ground as he walked, his big eyes bulging. "I'm scared, Laelaps... the explosion killed my humans, and my sister. I'm all alone. Are you alone, too?"

[image]

What an odd way to start a conversation, Laelaps mused to himself, albeit disturbing as well. He wasn't in the mood to hear someone's life story, either. But the way the pale little dog was looking at him with enormous, dark brown, scared eyes made his heart lurch.

"Yes. My... humans died, too," he said through pursed lips.

"No way! Jim's dead?" The chihuahua exclaimed, a hair too high. This caught the attention of the dozen other dogs trailing behind them, who followed with a flurry of "Jim!" and "No!"

Laelaps cursed under his breath. "*All of them are dead*."

That shut the little thing of a dog up. He fell back, ears drooping. Laelaps fought the twist of guilt in his belly.

As he and the rest of the dogs surged on to God knew where, the night grew darker. The moon was overshadowed by thick grey clouds, the same color as the smoke. The only lights that shone were the reds and blues of emergency vehicles wailing in the distance. Laelaps wished that the vehicles would shut up. He got their point.

"I'm going to find a place to rest," he announced, not turning to look

at the dogs. '*You're welcome to join me*' was on his tongue, but he kept his mouth shut.

The chihuahua from earlier toddled up to him. "I'll help you." He shifted his paws. "I'm Radar, by the way. I don't think we've met. I just knew who you were 'cause my sister and I liked to watch TV."

Dogs watching television. That was a new phenomenon.

"Fair enough." As the dogs split up to find places to sleep in the thick darkness, tripping over stray stones, Laelaps found himself warmed by the chihuahua's --Radar, that was his name-- presence. Laelaps never had any friends outside his humans; he didn't care to make any. All the dogs on his block idolized him, thought he was some kind of holy figure. Dogs really were a stupid, stupid species. He liked humans better in terms of looking at him. He liked being looked at as an everyday pet, not a *god.*

"*Ah!* I think I found one for us-- erm, for you!" Radar broke his train of thought. He was pawing at the hollow of a tree trunk-- it was *huge*. Big enough for four large dogs to squeeze into. Laelaps marveled his keen eye.

Laelaps smiled, padding up to him, almost tripping over a rock he didn't see but managing to catch himself with grace. He excused Radar's snort of a laugh, but only because he didn't fall. Laelaps drew his tongue over his jowls, uttering a bashful "thank you." He had no idea why it came out that way, but Radar didn't seem to mind. He found that quite comforting.

The night was hot and thick, unusual for the mild climate the area claimed. Laelaps was sprawled out outside of the hollow, where he let Radar and a couple of other dogs squeeze in. Truth be told, he didn't bat an eye at how selfless it made him look; he preferred to sleep alone, letting his ribcage mend itself from its trauma. His brain was still rattling in his skull. When he shut his eyes, all he saw was red, red, red, billowing smoke, all he heard were his own screams. He had to sleep. It was hard, with dread coiling in his belly when he realized he had no home now and he most likely had all these dogs to *take care of* now, like he was some sort of patriarch to them. He knew more would come, they'd find his scent --their

scents-- and because dogs were pack animals they'd come running and join the herd. Laelaps kind of wanted to die in his sleep. He kept his eyes shut, ignoring the wailing.

He slept.

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Unfortunately, he woke up. His flank was still sore. Just breathing made his teeth clench, and they were sore, too; he was grinding them in his sleep. Surprisingly enough he had no nightmares. He couldn't even remember what he had dreamed about. For all he knew, his mind was a beacon of darkness while he rested.

"Laelaps?" Radar's voice sounded behind him. He bit his lower lip and hauled himself to his feet, hissing expletives when seething hot pain shot up his ribcage.

"I'm awake," Laelaps said. His body wanted to crumple back down, but he bit the urge.

"Another pack found us," Radar murmured, nosing to the left. "They wanna speak to you."

Oh, God, of course *they did,* Laelaps rolled his eyes as he thought, and he hoped Radar didn't catch that. He limped, shoulders brushing with the chihuahua's, heading to where he was pointing his muzzle. He heard barks in the distance and a pack of at least fifteen dogs bounded towards him. Fifteen, Jesus.

A big, red, brindled dog-- Laelaps couldn't decipher what breed she was, so he concluded mutt-- stepped forward. In her tow, a male, no older than a year and the exact same shape as her, pressed close; Laelaps presumed that must be her pup.

[image]

"All of our humans are either dead or have abandoned us," she stated. "We have no choice but to stick together. You are the Laelaps they say you are, correct?"

Now, why in the hell would you question that? You watch TV, don't

you?

Laelaps ignored his sarcastic conscience. "Indeed I am," he said, sounding way more formal than he intended. He said no more.

"Oh, thank heavens, it really is you." Laelaps half-expected the big dog to drop to her haunches and bow to him. Maybe this whole smartest-dog-in-the-world thing was getting to his head. "I am Isabelle. My friends and I wish to join you on your quest to find a new home. That is what you are doing, right?"

"I'll be honest, I have no idea what the hell I'm doing," Laelaps said.

Isabelle's brow knit together. "Oh. I see."

"Mhm." Laelaps was way too focused on the pain in his side to care about what he was saying.

Isabelle tilted her head as if to get a better view of something. "You're injured." She nodded at Laelaps' foreleg, which was slightly lifted off the ground. Laelaps had no idea he was even doing that.

"Aren't we all?" *How deep, Laelaps.*

Isabelle dipped her broad head. "Indeed, we all are. Even if we do not show physical lameness, all our hearts share the same brokenness."

"Erm, it's not-- lameness, but..." Laelaps' voice trailed off when Isabelle barked a command to her followers.

"From now on, we follow the great Laelaps!" she declared. Her cronies hailed him.

Laelaps stifled a sigh. On top of losing his entire family, he now had to bear the responsibility of leader of thirty-some dogs all of a sudden. Then again, all of these dogs lost their families as well. They shared the same pain, whether their humans were killed, or had left them behind in the dust and soot. If he had to be honest with himself, if Jim and Marianne and Shawn were to leave him, he would never forgive them. Maybe he was one of the lucky ones.

Radar padded up to him, a half-smile on his golden face. "Trust me, I didn't see that coming, either."

"Oh, I expected it to happen," Laelaps whispered to him as Isabelle and her dogs wandered off to search the 'territory.' "There's at least hundreds of dogs in this whole area who were just left here to die. They think I'm some kind of all-knowing sign of God. They expect me to know all the answers."

Radar twitched an ear. "You can't blame them, can you? I thought that up until you *said that.* I've seen you say human words. Not just commands--any dog can do that--I've seen you say them by your own free *will.* Remember when you and your human had a little conversation?"

"I... yes." Laelaps did remember that. He didn't know where this was going.

"Well, erm, Jim was like, '*how are you doing?*'--I think that's what he said, I don't understand human half as well as you do--and you were like, '*I'm well.*' I have never seen a dog do that before. I thought only, like, birds could do that. I swear, you put so much effort into that, like it wasn't for treats. Like you were literally saying that you were doing well."

"Where the hell are you taking this, Radar?"

"What I'm trying to say is that you're a literal genius, Laelaps. Use your mind for good things. These dogs will have you eating out of your paw if you wanted them to. And I say you should."

Laelaps couldn't wrap his brain around what his newfound friend was trying to convey for the life of him. His brow was scrunched together as he said, "I don't understand."

"Oh, my God, I'm starting to think your brain power was just for show after all." Radar kicked at the ground with his little paws. "Stop being so hesitant and become a leader! An alpha dog! You understand what these dogs are going through, I know you do for a fact! These dogs need someone like you, Laelaps. Someone smart. Someone so universally *liked* and *admired* that no one will ever say

no to." Radar was looking at him so intensely that his heart leaped.

Laelaps' lips were sealed so tight it was starting to hurt. For a moment, he could feel his eyes water and his vision go blurry. Radar was right. Being self-centered wouldn't help in a situation like this.

Dogs were pack animals, weren't they?

"Thank you, Radar," Laelaps said, long ears flowing in the thick breeze.

"You swear on me that you'll try your best?" Radar's brow lifted, goading an answer he wanted.

"No," Laelaps replied, and Radar's tail drooped before Laelaps went on, "I'll swear on *myself* that I'll try my best."

Radar bared his tiny white teeth in a smile. "Good answer."

And together they laughed. Laelaps only knew this charismatic little pup for a day, only spoken a few words, but he could already feel something growing between them. He couldn't tell what, and he didn't care what. Radar's presence alone was comforting. His laugh even more so. His bellowing, loud, obnoxious laugh.

They settled, nearby the hollow where they slept, and Laelaps could care less if dogs were staring at them, getting jealous that Radar was laughing with him.

"So what was your sister like?"

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All the dogs were sprawled around one another as the sun hung high in the afternoon sky. They were awaiting orders from Laelaps, who laid down for a nap in the shade of a madrone tree. No one seemed to be bothering him, however, so he let enough alone.

Besides, he had hardly an *iota* of energy left in his body. He felt as though the pain in his ribs was worsening, and worried that some kind of infection was festering inside of him. It would be a shame

for him to die now, especially after promising Radar.

God, *Radar.*

Radar, especially, was perhaps the only dog Laelaps felt a deep connection to, besides Isabelle. He had learned upon chatting with the chihuahua the other night that *he* felt like a *she* some times, and now was one of them, and she was to be referred to as female, no ifs, ands, or buts. Laelaps adapted to the new pronouns right off the bat, because gender was something dogs could care less about, but there was no real *term* for dogs like that, as they were quite rare. Laelaps would be her companion no matter what, even if it was a new thing for him.

"What do you think you're doing?" A familiar voice woke Laelaps from his light slumber. Indeed, it was Radar herself, looming --or at least attempting to loom-- over Laelaps' limp body. Laelaps lifted his narrow head weakly.

"I'm in more pain than you think."

"And? You *swore* you'd lead these dogs away from this place! Find them --us-- a new home!" Radar's voice was growing louder with each word, and Laelaps cringed, embarrassed.

A few dogs were looking right at them. "Alright, alright, I'll get up." He hauled himself to his feet. "Dogs! I --erm-- command you to rise!" He shouted.

Almost all of the thirty-odd dogs rose to their paws immediately, stunning Laelaps. The rest of them slowly followed suit. All of them, however, shared the same look, a look of pretty much undying loyalty. These dogs didn't even *know* Laelaps that well. Only from television, or word of mouth, or God knew what else. But their willingness to obey was unabashed. Like Laelaps really was a holy figure.

He tasted human words on his mouth. He wanted to test them on these dogs. He wanted, almost desperately, to feel what power he could convey. From the way Radar was smiling at him it was as if his friend was *egging him on,* like she knew what Laelaps was

wanting to do.

"Today... from this day... forward...." Laelaps really needed to work on his speeches if he wanted to keep this stint up. "I will lead us to our new..."

He curled his lips back. Drew out his tongue.

"*Home!*"

His humanspeak accent was still extremely thick. It barely even sounded like the word. It was more of a "*haauun*" sound than anything even resembling "home." But it *worked*.

The dogs began to cheer and whoop and holler. Laelaps was reminded of the humans that would clap and celebrate when he would pronounce Jim's name on live television, but this was far different. There was a thick air of pure happiness in this cheering, not just pleasure or entertainment. These dogs were glad, overjoyed, to have the smartest dog they'd ever known leading them on a journey to a faraway paradise. Laelaps grinned, grinned harder than he'd grinned in the six years he'd been on the earth.

"I knew you could do it," Radar said beside him.

Laelaps closed his eyes. "You put way too much faith in me for only knowing me for this short a time, pal."

"That's because I know you *can* do this. I knew it when I first saw you on TV."

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Laelaps was beginning to ignore the pain in his side. It simply wasn't important right now. He had dogs to take care of, and a new home to find for them.

"What we are going to do first," Laelaps began to the crowd of followers, "is find as many stray and abandoned dogs as we can, before we set out. We simply cannot leave these starving compatriots behind."

The dogs cheered again, enthusiastic with the idea. Laelaps was surprised to find that no one was opposed to it. A lingering coil in his gut suggested that perhaps they were scared to say no, but he pushed it away.

"We will scour the houses. Every single block. Every street until our pads run down with callouses, until we *bleed* from walking."

More damn cheering. At least they were compliant with all of this.

"We would be honored to help as many dogs as possible found this paradise," Isabelle proclaimed. Laelaps raised his brow. Found? A paradise? Laelaps wondered if she should be the leader instead, considering that she seemed to have more ideas planned out for the future than he did. Laelaps was just flying by on the seat of his croup, hoping it would appease everybody, especially her and Radar.

He and the dogs turned to leave the gravelly area, littered with shrubs and sickly madrone trees, back to suburbia. He could feel his pads grinding against the stones and he bit his lip to ignore the pain, because more intense pain was awaiting him already. Laelaps led them in a sort of queue, Isabelle and Radar close behind him. If any human were to see this --more than thirty dogs led by a world-renowned supergenius Saluki who was simply down on his luck-- they would certainly freak. Laelaps was thankful that he could no longer hear sirens, nor see any trace of humankind. Not even animal control.

The Disaster, as some of his dogs appeared to start calling it, was much more of a catastrophe than Laelaps could even begin to imagine, if not even animal control was there to pick up abandoned animals. He understood that humans were almost always scared or paranoid, but certainly not *this* paranoid. Laelaps, in the hundreds of human words he had picked up from Jim, remembered Jim talking to his students about a terrible natural disaster that killed two thousand humans and (Laelaps assumed) countless more animals. The humans fled for their lives, leaving their animals to perish. Eventually, though, animal control came back for the animals and reunited the lucky ones with their families; Laelaps only knew that part because a worried student asked about the poor

little animals. Laelaps wondered if the humans would come back for their pets in this situation. It wasn't likely.

While they scoured the empty and burned down houses, stumbling over charred animal corpses --the human ones had been picked up, so it seemed-- some of the dogs were discussing the likely causes for the Disaster.

"I swear, humans did this," a shiba said to his pomeranian companion.

"You think?" The pomeranian queried.

"No, I'm being serious. What else could have caused this? You know humans. They fight all the time. Don't your humans fight? Uh... erm. Maybe a really evil human --or, like, a *bunch* of evil humans-- decided to just... rain hell from the sky. Because they were really angry, or something. Think about it."

Laelaps gritted his teeth. "I think that's enough conspiracy theories for now," he called back to them. They shut their yaps.

Radar fell in line with him. "You know, they might be onto something."

"I know." Laelaps, for all that he found humans fascinating, understood how aggressive they were. There was a concept called "war" that Jim kept on explaining to his pupils. According to Jim, human beings were shaped by warfare. They became who they were as a species by war. As far as Laelaps knew, no other species did that sort of thing. Sure, dogs had territorial scraps, but nothing like sending their own kind to die for land or an idea or whatever else. "I just think... we'll never know what caused this. There's no point in playing detective with it."

"Woah, you know what a detective is? You watched TV, too?"

Radar's companionship filled a gap in Laelaps' heart, but that didn't neutralize his-- Radar had informed the group that he would switch back to prior pronouns-- juvenile questions. Laelaps stifled a sigh. "*Sometimes*."

There was no sign of living dogs for about five streets until a small pack of four scented them out and attacked them. They were infinitely outnumbered, and one of Laelaps' dogs nearly slaughtered one of them before Isabelle had to intervene. The quartet were cold, hungry, and terrified. It hadn't been long enough for their ribs to show, but their eyes glistened with starvation.

"Please, for the love of God, help us," one of them pleaded.

And so they did, easily integrating them into their large herd.

The unfortunate fact of the matter was that, despite the amount of dogs they did find, there were not as many survivors as Laelaps had anticipated. There was that niggling sense of dread that predicted such, but seeing the charred corpses of his own species --dogs he'd met on walks-- made his stomach churn. The wails of his packmates discovering the remains of their siblings and friends didn't help.

Radar sniffed at the air and immediately turned course, snapping Laelaps out of his own head. He moved to follow suit, but Radar gestured that he stay and shepherd the distressed behemoth of a pack they lead. And Radar bounded off, down the adjacent street, leaving Laelaps feeling just as helpless and meek as he did when Jim threw his leash to the ground at the first explosion. Behind him, dogs continued to scatter, scouring for lost loved ones.

The air was cut with a horrible scream.

Laelaps' tail was taut between his hocks. Jim, Marianne, and Shawn's bodies were taken far away from here, he knew that much; all the human bodies were gone, with only haunting silhouettes made of soot leaving traces of their last moments. The idea of finding the mangled excuses for what were once warm and breathing beings that cared for him... tangy saliva filled his mouth and he staved off the urge to vomit.

Radar's caterwauls were met with silence from his packmates. Laelaps looked toward the clouds. The sky was so utterly, disgustingly blue and beautiful.

Isabelle, with her pup in tow, stood beside Laelaps. She didn't speak

a word.

It felt like hours before Radar limped back to the other dogs. His eyes were unfocused from seeing too much.

"My humans are gone," he said, "but my sister's still there."

There was no proper burial, not for any dog-- there were simply too many. The number of dead swarmed the living by times even Laelaps couldn't comprehend. Whenever a dog tried to pick up a body, the charred, blackened skin would slough off like the glove on a human hand, and several dogs nearby would retch at the smell. Laelaps wondered, by the humanspeak words he'd picked up from Jim's lectures, if this was what human war was like.

[image]

When he regained his composure, Laelaps vocalized that if one dog could not be buried, then no dog should. Rightfully so, there were indignant snarls at first, but not a single word was spoken against him. He couldn't decipher their glazed expressions; with the three dozen-odd dogs lined up like they were, Laelaps could have sworn they were an army of the undead. The thick silence that wafted through the air didn't help.

The brave soul to break the quiet after a few minutes was, in fact, one of the young dogs from the starving quartet.

"Tell us that things will get better," he pleaded, eyes wet and choking on the words, "Tell us we won't have to see anything like this again."

The dog was much taller than Laelaps, but he appeared so small to Laelaps' eye. Laelaps' throat constricted itself.

"When we find our paradise, catastrophe will never rear its ugly head." He didn't realize his voice was wavering. "I promise."

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The search for more surviving dogs was getting better, but the sentiment among the dogs was still somber. Laelaps vowed, again

and again (the vows were dissolving into attempts to calm the pack's frayed nerves at that point) that he would not leave a single living canine behind in the rubble. About a week had passed since the Disaster struck, and many of the initial survivors caught under debris had perished from lack of food or water. Laelaps didn't know he was capable of feeling so much emotion. It was overwhelming. He kind of resented it.

Most other times, however, they *would* find a dog or two, hell, even a small pack. Once or twice, there were as many as eight dogs congregated together, scouring for any sign of living prey to kill and eat. Every time one of his packmates would complain about the lack of squirrels and finches in the area, Laelaps would give them whale-eye, saying they should eat *cat* if they're so starving. Laelaps never cared for cats, and he *was* hungry, but he was also well aware that plenty of dogs grew up with cats in their homes, and consuming one would be quite tasteless, pun intended.

The number of dogs in Laelaps' group had grown exponentially: from thirty in the first few days to about almost two hundred. The large number was worrisome. If dogs were already complaining about dwindling food supply, how would Laelaps be able to provide for triple that amount of dogs? One of his comrades pointed out the possibility that prey could be hiding outside of human areas, such as in the creeks where pipes could provide shelter. Laelaps chided himself for being so secluded and oblivious to the world around him before everything went to shit.

Lo and behold, there were no voles or squirrels or prairie dogs down by the creek-- there were *dogs, refugees,* curled inside the putrid pipelines where frothy green slush puddled around their feet. Laelaps and Radar attempted to silence the disappointed groans from behind them. Upon approaching the mutts, one of the skinnier ones lunged for Laelaps' throat, and absolute havoc broke out. Laelaps was scared half to death, but he managed to maintain *some* of his composure, at least enough to break up the fight with a mighty, humanspeak-riddled bark. Laelaps was in no mood nor physical state to pick a fight, and the last thing this pack needed was another corpse to shove aside. He rarely bared his fangs, so when he did then, he was genuinely puzzled by the hot wave of

primal instinct that washed over him.

"How do you speak human?" Laelaps' attempted killer demanded. "That's impossible."

"After all this shit," Laelaps gestured his muzzle toward the site of the Disaster, "nothing's impossible, kid. How the hell did you find this place, anyway?"

The mutt --a juvenile male with piercing eyes and a mottled liver coat-- put on a suspicious face. "We're half-feral. We know where everything is."

"He's spitting lies. There's no such thing as half-feral," a small dog from the pack of survivors balked.

That's when Isabelle stepped forward. "There absolutely is."

"Mom," Isabelle's son attempted to thwart her, but she continued over him.

"We're few, but we exist. That boy is telling the truth." Isabelle narrowed her eyes. "We're products of hapless humans who never bothered getting our sires fixed."

Laelaps turned to her, exasperated. "Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

Isabelle looked at him like she would a particularly dense squirrel. "Are pet dogs really as oblivious as you all seem to be?"

"I like her," the male with the odd scent said. He came forward, nodding toward his packmates to rise to their feet as well. "Call me Hollyhock. My brothers and I could show you all a few places to lay low for a while."

Laelaps' jaw twitched. There was something about this "Hollyhock" that was... strange. Foreign. Alien. He couldn't pinpoint what. He tipped his head, examining her. His anatomy was a bit odd: dog like, but not all dog. His scent gave off the same vibe. But the cautious look in his eyes was beginning to dissipate, especially with Isabelle's presence being made. He decided to lower his haunches.

"Very well. Show us the way."

Hollyhock and his siblings were about to take the lead, but snarls from the pet dogs alerted them that Laelaps was in charge and was to remain at his position in front. Laelaps' stomach twisted when he realized that he didn't attempt to protest. He glanced at Radar and Isabelle, who for sure would have said something at his silence, but they weren't even looking in his direction. He wondered if humans were this complacent with their own leaders.

One by one, they passed through the creek, hopping on slippery rocks. Laelaps' heart swelled upon seeing healthy dogs aid the elderly and disabled. When Laelaps himself jumped onto a particularly steep rock, pain clamped down on his left side, and he shrieked, about to stumble into the icy current below before one of Hollyhock's brothers broke his fall.

Laelaps was too incapacitated to speak, but he gave a thankful nod to the odd-smelling dog.

His momentary hero only narrowed his eyes back. "Are you sure you're fit to lead?"

Before Laelaps could respond, the dog helped him to his feet and gestured for him to keep going. Laelaps pursed his jowls and limped onto another rock.

It took over an hour to get all of the dogs to reach the other side of the creekbed. Beyond the steep scar in the earth, Laelaps climbed up and peeked over the gangly limbs of wild grass to gaze upon one of the most beautiful things he had, and ever will have, seen.

Sprawling green plains stretched across the earth, perhaps even surpassing the horizon, as though they went on forever. But the land was not flat, no, his eyes danced along, tracing sprawling, rolling hills that shone yellow in the high noon light. Gargantuan oak trees were scattered among the welcoming emptiness, and their shape gave them a sort of lively look. providing pockets of shade where the sun bore its might down onto the land. In the faint distance, herds of pine trees congregated into a dense forest. Mountains towered over the entire area, and they were so *close* to

Laelaps now, only visible as faint rows of green and blue where he used to live.

[image]

Most importantly, with those precise sighthound of eyes of his, he could see *deer,* grazing in small compact numbers under the gargantuan oaks. Deer was *food.* His dogs were hungry. *He* was hungry.

He signaled for his pack to investigate this sort of paradise--

"Whoa, whoa, wait a minute."

Hollyhock was spontaneously flanking him, his hackles raised. His teeth weren't bared, but his gaze was intense, albeit challenging.

"We're only meaning to pass through here. You can catch a rabbit or deer or whatever, but don't get too excited."

What? Laelaps' brows knit in indignance. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

Hollyhock's expression turned sour. "This is coyote territory. It's occupied. They will *seriously* mess you up if you think you can just waltz over and piss on their trees."

Damn it all. Coyotes? Laelaps had only heard stories and rumors of those little bastards, but none of them were particularly pretty. A couple of times during Laelaps' life in that neighborhood, a coyote would be spotted trying to maul a cat or two-- sometimes, even, a small dog. Laelaps thought of Radar.

"Coyotes are not pack animals, Hollyhock," Isabelle said, pushing her way to the front. "And I'm sure there's so many of them that they need *this* much territory."

"You all don't need this much territory, either," Hollyhock pointed out. "And they're not *animals.* They're canines, just like us."

Radar narrowed her eyes. "There's two hundred of us; we need *something.* What's your deal with coyotes, anyways?"

Hollyhock shoved his muzzle in Radar's space. "My brothers and I are coydogs."

The crowd went dead silent, at least until Radar scoffed and said, "coyotes and dogs can *inter breed?*"

The coydog in question bristled. "Coyotes are canines, just like dogs," he repeated, this time slower, licking his fangs through every syllable.

"I believe that's enough," Laelaps bellowed, hobbling forward before Hollyhock could take any damn chances. Radar maintained a defensive posture, her ears flattened. "Hollyhock, I can assure you that we do not mean any harm toward your kind--"

"My *kind?*" Hollyhock began to look wild.

Laelaps spluttered. "Pardon me. The coyotes, is what I meant to say. I believe there should be some initial investigation of this land before we pass it off as untouchable. Just look at how sprawling it is. That has to be acres upon acres of usable territory."

The dogs behind them murmured in agreement, and even one of Hollyhock's brothers looked convinced. Hollyhock lowered his tail and stopped snarling, but his eyes were still distrusting. Laelaps could care less how he felt at this point-- there were dozens of half starved dogs he had to feed.

"Okay." Hollyhock finally conceded, the hair on his neck falling back down. "We will show you the quickest way to get down there."

That was more like it. "Thank you," Laelaps said, curt, and lead the way once more.

--

"*What in the hell is going on?*"

Laelaps stormed onto the scene, directly where he had heard the chaos coming from, the jolts of agony returning to his body.

The behemoth he had called his pack had stopped to rest nearby the

ever-stretching forest. Laelaps, Radar, Isabelle, and her son had been given the special privilege of sleeping in the yawning maw of a cave, hidden with dense clumps of moss and lichen. His paws squelched through peaty soil, which felt oh-so refreshing on his abused pads, despite more urgent pain searing through his limbs.

Before him, a small pack of his own dogs were snarling at a couple of coyotes over a half-eaten deer carcass.

Laelaps wanted to *smite* Hollyhock for being right. And his dogs for being callous little bastards, not heeding Hollyhock's warning. And himself, for not *keeping an eye on his own damned dogs.*

"Who the fuck are you?" One of the coyotes sneered.

"Who's *he*? He's Laelaps, you dimwitted cur," the small white dog with a face red with deer blood said.

Her Ridgeback looking companion hooted. "Coyotes, man, they're hollow up there."

"--low on the evolutionary chain, I'd say--"

"--can't even stand *each other*, like they're lone wolf wannabes, *Jesus*--"

"That's *enough!*" Laelaps had to bellow his own lungs out to get them to stop, before the coyotes would lunge in utter rage and tear their collars off along with their throats. And from the way the animals were standing there, seething, spitting, they were damn near about to. Laelaps turns to the dogs, eyes wild. "I want to know what the hell this is all about, and I want to know *now*."

His screaming had brought a small crowd behind him, he could scent it, but he dared not look.

The white dog licked her chops, but she didn't cower. Laelaps wanted to smack her upside her apple shaped head. "We found a kill," she explained. "And we tried to drag it back to camp to share it, but then these coyotes came bounding over."

"You *found* it?" Laelaps asked, incredulous. "You didn't kill it?"

Oh, then she cowered. "No, sir."

The female coyote muttered something like "pack animals" under her breath, and Laelaps pointed his nose to her. "That's enough out of you."

Laelaps thought he'd silenced both sides, but the female coyote stepped into his bubble, snout facing snout. "What makes you think I'm gonna listen to you? You all are trespassing."

"You have ought to know why we're here--" Laelaps began.

"We know, and we don't care," the male coyote said. "Fuck off."

Then something inside Laelaps snapped. "You, Ridgeback." He swished his tail towards him. "I want these things out of my sight."

The Ridgeback was apprehensive at first, but Laelaps bored him down with a mighty gaze, and he obliged; he reared up and barreled toward the smaller canines, fangs out and claws splayed, baying like a maniac. Laelaps heard once upon a time that this breed of dog was designed to kill lions, of all things, and Laelaps could certainly believe the tale with the way his subordinate was chasing the coyotes off the territory as though he was a spaniel flushing pheasants.

Laelaps stood there, guarding the white dog and the deer and the territory like a fearsome statue, and when the Ridgeback returned, there was blood on his face. Laelaps assumed it wasn't his blood.

"You won't be seeing those guys again," the Ridgeback affirmed.

Laelaps nodded. "Excellent work."

When Laelaps turned tail back to his cave, the dogs were cheering. He grinned back at them.

It wasn't until later that evening that the coydogs discovered the news.

"Laelaps, you son of a *bitch*!" That was undoubtedly that Hollyhock kid's yell. Laelaps uncurled himself from the stone he was curled up

on, bathing in the setting sun, albeit with much hesitation. It wasn't that he was *scared*, but--

Hollyhock was drooling from the jowls with rage, his eyes bloodshot. Behind him, one of his brothers was carrying a coyote on his back.

The *corpse* of a coyote.

[image]

"I swear," Hollyhock's voice was shaky, and every word that drawled out of his mouth was a horrible growl. "We have let you stay here for three days, and your degenerate, ungrateful mutts pull this off. It's time you get the hell out of here."

In that moment, Hollyhock looked so much more coyote than dog. The blazing amber eyes, the bristling grizzled hair, the slacked maw.

"You, too, are a dog." Laelaps stood his ground. "Who are you allegiant to, Hollyhock?"

"Never to you, Laelaps," Hollyhock snarled. "I have dog in my blood, sure. But not on earth, never in Hell, will I ever bow down and lick your paws."

Hollyhock kicked at the dirt and let it spray on Laelaps' muzzle, as he and his brothers turned to leave. The dogs behind them didn't cheer that time.

He never saw Hollyhock again.

--

For a long while, the sky had been grey and thick with clouds, teasing oncoming rain, but never giving it. The rivers that cut through the pine forest and scarred the beds of soil stagnated. The water wasn't sour nor stale, but a current would add to the bounty of the territory.

The civilization the dogs had called home had facets stretching

beyond the horizon. The pine forest gave way to rocky mountains that towered above even the tallest trees, dwarfing the hills to the south. Winding roads of dirt stood adjacent to ravines and plains. Not a single dog starved due to the bounty of deer in the forests and rabbits on the moors.

Things had calmed. No one challenged him. There were no questions. Life continued as though the dogs had always lived here, as though time before the forest ceased to exist in their memory.

Laelaps wished it were the same for him.

For the first time in months, Laelaps missed Jim, Marianne, and Shawn. He yearned for the sand-blood scent Marianne carried. He wanted belly rubs from Shawn, the ones that would make his hind leg spasm. He wanted to hear Jim's voice again.

He was surrounded by dogs, and yet without his humans, he felt so alone. Incomplete.

Laelaps was a pet dog for many years, but now he was a leader.

He let the sun set, as though implying he controlled it. He didn't know what to believe at this point.

If he wanted to control the sun, he could.

[image]

--

The stagnant air stunk of deer carcass, and a wave of nausea made Laelaps sway. He stared at the bone, red and still seeping with marrow, between his forepaws, before he curled his lip and pushed it aside. He really should have made some effort to make it *look* like he had been chewing on it: it was a gift from a pack of half-starved molossers. The bone started to roll toward the face of the cliff's edge, and Laelaps squawked--albeit as quietly as he could, since Isabelle and Radar were still sleeping--and caught it with his bum leg, sending pain ziplining through his body. He hissed through his teeth.

"Son of a," Laelaps whispered, his paws half-hanging off of the cliff. The fear of heights that he swore he used to have fell flat upon him, as he gazed down to the plains below. It was night, so nothing had any color to it, save for the dull orange hue that the Disaster polluted the sky with. Still gripping the bone as hard as he could, he fought off his lameness and dragged himself back onto safer space.

No one talked about Hollyhock. No one talked about his brothers. No one talked about the coyotes.

The energy that was keeping him on his feet for most of the day was all but gone now. He'd tried to sleep for hours, but all he could do was toss and turn, and that just made Radar grumble. It was as though his body had reached an impasse with his brain.

"Laelaps?"

Laelaps drew his jowls between his bottom fangs. "Radar."

His mate yawned loud, almost theatrically so, and trudged up to him. "Had the dream again?"

"No. It's. I'm. I'm fine." Laelaps' pelt heated. Even a blithering idiot could tell something was up.

Radar rolled his eyes and laid down beside him. "It's about what Isabelle said yesterday, isn't it?"

Bingo. "What ever would give that away," Laelaps drawled.

"Cut the crap, honestly. You agreed to become the Leader. Stop acting like a puppy."

Laelaps so desired to shoot up onto his legs and bark, but the ache in his left side still lingered. "You're implying that I was always on board with all of this." His voice was sneering and accusatory, but Laelaps paid it no mind. "I didn't want all this to happen. It's because these knuckle-dragging treat-beggers equated *me being smart* to *me being a god*."

And you were one of them, at first. Laelaps felt sick.

Radar's lips quirked, but he didn't laugh. "None of us wanted this to happen. But it did, and we're stuck with it. Life sucks like that."

Why did Radar always have to be such a beacon of blunt wisdom? More importantly, Laelaps thought, why wasn't he the Leader instead? Sure, Laelaps had charisma--he *guessed*--and was pretty damn intelligent, but Radar always knew what to say, even if it made the little voice in Laelaps' head shriek with impulsive anger.

The grizzled fur that was beginning to mat all over his body bristled. Radar wasn't challenging him. He was only trying to help Laelaps out of his head space, just as Laelaps would do the same for him when he was suffering.

Laelaps and Radar loved each other.

"Laelaps."

And yet, there was still that lingering veil of threat, almost primal.

"*Laelaps,* God!"

He shook the fog out of his head. "I'm sorry." It was such a struggle to make eye contact right then, but Laelaps looked into those big brown eyes anyway. "I'm sorry. God, I'm so fucked up."

Laelaps expected Radar to give a curt *we all are*, like everyone on the damn planet kept telling him, but Radar curled against his body, warm and bracing. "I know. I'm sorry, too."

They lay like that for a couple of minutes, the only sound the occasional rustle of the grass beneath them from a passing breeze. It didn't hurt Laelaps to breathe as much as it did a few hours before, but that could have just been the placebo of Radar cuddled up beside him. He rested his head on the grass. His little outburst made him just a tad more tired.

[image]

Stomping paws interrupted the silence; Laelaps stifled the urge to pull at his ears and scream.

"I see the honeymoon phase is still going strong," Isabelle said, impassive as ever, planting herself like a very fluffy, very annoying tree next to them.

"You're a riot, Isabelle," Radar replied. "Not at all a grade-A ruiner of peaceful moments."

"I try my best."

"Where's your son?" Laelaps asked. The kid usually followed his mother around like a shadow, but he was nowhere to be found.

Isabelle's brows knit. "He's made himself some friends. I'm. Happy for him."

Neither Laelaps nor Radar commented. Isabelle cleared her throat. "Did you think about what I've been suggesting, Laelaps?"

"Perhaps a little too much," Laelaps replied in transparency. Radar nodded when Laelaps looked to him, somewhat out of comfort.

"We don't know how long you're going to be hobbling around and barking orders. Dogs with wounds like yours don't live too long." Isabelle, always the courier of brutal honesty. Before Laelaps could yelp in protest, Isabelle continued. "I'm not saying we need to usurp you--that would just be plain stupid--but if the Civilization wants to last, it needs some kind of. System."

Laelaps narrowed his eyes. "Like how humans do it."

His friend shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. We just need to plan our course right."

"Radar can be the next Leader."

Radar squirmed out from under Laelaps' foreleg and scoffed. "A chihuahua can't lead a hundred molossers."

The truth was biting, but Laelaps felt the need to bite back. "I'm as much a weakling as you think you are. I can hardly walk, for pete's sake."

"We need someone young, Laelaps. Someone who's just as smart as you are." Isabelle's eyes were piercing.

"*Impossible*," Laelaps and Radar barked in perfect unison.

The mutt's tongue laved at a scar on her paw. "You'd be surprised. Imagine how many dogs you've rounded up that never got the chance to prove their smarts like you did."

Radar, at least, backed off, his ears angling back and forth.

"I can't believe Isabelle, of all dogs, has a point," he said after a long pause, and Isabelle growled and batted at him, akin to a lumbering bear.

Laelaps would have affectionally called them *idiots* if Isabelle didn't blow his damn mind. How did he never realize this? It was obvious that many of the surviving dogs were ignored, even neglected, by their humans. If anything, maybe the Disaster *liberated* them.

But there was still that sense of challenge that swathed over him every time he gave the idea of a new Leader thought. Isabelle and Radar were right, however. Laelaps didn't know how much more his body could take, festering from the inside, slow but sure.

"I'll call a meeting tomorrow," Laelaps finally announced, and his friends stopped rough housing. "Round up as many dogs around a year or so in age as I can. I'll test them, see how they fair."

Isabelle grinned with Radar still pinned under her paws. "These dogs have been through similar hells. Perhaps not as hellish as yours, but hell regardless."

"Yeah." Laelaps pursed his lips. "I'm sure they have."

--

"Long live Laelaps! Long live the Civilization!"

If Laelaps wasn't beaming with pride, he would have considered the cheers from the legion of dogs below the cliffside to be somewhat ironic. His mouth still stung from the poultice one of the cleric dogs

had given him to chew on. Weeks passed, and his ribs were beginning to lose the ache, and his flank no longer radiated festering warmth, but he knew he was still leading the Civilization on borrowed time. Confrontations with coyotes were becoming more frequent. Radar had to be accompanied by molossers to stave away the barbaric creatures.

This, however, was not the time to be pessimistic.

Some of the dogs whom had passed his rigorous mental and physical tests were molossers, but others were smaller breeds; there were heelers, shepherds, spaniels, sighthounds. Contrary to his biases, one molosser exceeded the rest of the other dogs in nearly every complex mental puzzle. Laelaps' interest was certainly piqued. Isabelle knew more than her demeanor lead on.

Laelaps could not fight off the assumption that the smarter dogs would be the more qualified candidates to take his place. The lummoxes that could haul a mastiff onto his back were daunting, sure, but the pensive canines that held quiet yet steady gazes, eyes clear with intelligence, gave him more of an impression-- the ones who had charisma, on top of all that, were held on an even higher pedestal in his mind. He was not the only dog in the Civilization with gifts. He was simply in the right place, at the right time.

With a mirthful grin, Laelaps turned his muzzle towards Radar and Isabelle, who sat behind him. Radar beamed, her tail thumping the earth, and Isabelle gave a curt nod. Laelaps grinned and nodded back. He felt warm.

Gesturing back towards his disciples, Laelaps gave himself a shake and stood up straight, croup in line with withers. "These are your future guardians," he began. "When the time comes, and I must give my soul to the stars above" --a few indignant howls from the audience sounded out-- "These dogs shall devote their own souls to the protection and longevity of the Civilization. Whatever threat may come, the Civilization shall endure and it shall thrive. I, along with my most stalwart diplomat, and my most steadfast guard, will teach these young dogs the ways of leadership."

The crowd bayed in jubilation. Even his disciples, whom were to

remain collected, could not retain smiles.

Empowered, Laelaps took a breath and continued.

"We have endured much strife in the process of building this Civilization. Dozens of companions, pack members, families, have perished, and we must honor their memory-- but their work ethic and spirit shall be engraved in this land! They will not be forgotten.

We as a species were crafted from the hands of man; from man we were gifted with morality, compassion, the ability to work together —qualities other species could only dream of. And what good attributes from man we have inherited, we have left behind their bad: their callousness, their thirst for war. Today, we are free from the clutches of humankind. We shall work together in peace, to instate a world where dogs even far beyond us will desire to venture so that they, too, may be given a second chance.

As long as I, Laelaps, and my disciples, and their disciples long after, oversee this land, we will never fall to the level of man-- for we are stronger than man. We are smarter than man. We are greater than man!"

Beyond the booming of roars and cheers and rejoicing cries, Laelaps' eardrums pounded with blood. His heart squeezed and pushed its life force throughout the rest of his aging body. And yet, his legs were locked in stead, the same way as when Jim ran after the first explosion.

The sun held itself high in the cloudless sky, piercing bright light, boring straight down onto Laelaps, giving him the spotlight, the main focus.

[image]

Laelaps stared out, gazing with piercing eyes, into a distance-less nothing, while the crowd still cheered.

To the sun, to the sky, to the dogs, Laelaps was ethereal. He was the beacon, the guide.

He controlled the sun.

Chapter One

[image]

[image]

Even as the sun dawned upon the plains, warming the morning chill and signaling the coming of spring, Keith felt something was going to go wrong that day.

It began with a jitter in his legs. It traveled like ticks under his fur till it reached his brain, scratching at it. It would screech at him that he should feel unsafe, for both himself and his bonded packmates. Keith had to stave the urge to gnaw off the bandages and chew at his carpals.

The problem was that nothing *appeared* wrong this morning-- in fact, everything felt routine. He lay in a crouch, flanked by Luna on his left and Madrone on his right, presence concealed by prickly shrubs of bramble. His hocks were coiled to spring at the first detection of prey in the corner of his eye. The first day of spring gave Keith and his friends at least a tiny glimmer of hope: spring meant prey would birth more prey. Babies were an easy catch, albeit not as big a mouthful, but compromises had to be made.

Keith looked to Madrone. They were intensely focused--when were they not--tapping the ground with a big paw, unfazed by the itchy brambles that were driving Keith crazy. He assumed that since the small pack found zilch that morning, and the usually touch-sensitive Madrone sat like a post, they were starving. Their gaze, a piercing amber, wouldn't even move to blink.

Then Keith looked to Luna. Unlike their hyperfocused friend, Luna gazed back, raising a brow and gesturing to turn back toward the plains. She appeared disgruntled and uncomfortable-- the brambles, Keith was sure. Or maybe she was in a lousy mood, as she was want to be. She was a black-and-white mass of fur, pressed to the ground;

her odd eyes were squinted from the thorns shoved in her face.

"Keith, pay attention," Madrone said, nudging him with their broad shoulder.

"Hrm, yeah," Keith replied, and he shifted his weight and turned back to the open plains. It was just so difficult, he couldn't focus. His brain couldn't keep quiet. *Keep looking, something's gonna happen*, it kept telling him. *Protect Luna and Madrone.*

Of course, if Keith were to say something, Luna would only accuse him of crying coyote again. Point taken; Keith had come to terms with the fact that he stressed too much and sometimes saw things that weren't there. Poisonous flowers that weren't actually poisonous. Raccoons, when raccoons didn't even live on the Plains, and they were really just particularly fat prairie dogs. Keith's coat burned with humiliation.

Madrone nudged him again. "*Keith*," they said, in that soft, worrying whisper of a voice, "are you feeling okay?"

"It was probably that vole he ate last night," Luna snickered. "That thing smelled like a trash can."

"Har har," Keith said. "I'm fine, Madrone. Just can't focus this morning. Sorry."

His friend nodded. "It's alright, but... the prey pile's low right now. We have to find something today." Their usually impassive voice had a note of tension to it. Keith only felt more guilty.

"I know, I know." If carefree, easygoing Madrone was stressing about the prey pile, then something had to be done. Madrone's stomach growled to reiterate their point. Keith set his snout toward the horizon, pricked up his ears, and coiled his shoulders.

There was silence for many minutes. Not a living shadow cast over the plains. Only the gargantuan oaks whose arms spread wide across, giving shade, rustled with the undetectable breeze. Madrone's paw-tapping grew into thumping. Keith grimaced. They

weren't going to find anything. They would go back to the cave dejected, partition the last morsels of prey, they were going to starve, slow, agonizing, their digestive systems would eat themselves, Keith would watch his closest and only friends suffer and *he wouldn't be able to do anything about it oh God settling here all the way away from the humans was such a horrible idea--*

"Did you guys have to choose the brambles?" Luna's whine interrupted Keith's dissociated spiral. "My coat's gonna get all messed up."

"Luna, hush," Madrone silenced her. "Hey, Keith, did you hear that?"

Keith's head was still spinning, but he snuffled at the air. His gaze darted back and forth, trying to spot where that distant rustling was coming from. The sun was in his eyes, blocking most of his peripheral vision, but he sidled the temporary pain because starving to death would be a whole lot more unbearable. Where was it coming from? He couldn't remember how small the rustle was, as he was fretting to hell and back while it happened, and he wanted to kick himself so bad. Where was it--

Oh.

If that was where the rustling came from, then both Keith and Madrone misjudged just how prodigious their hearing was. In the distance, a couple of silhouetted figures stood near an oak, gazing back at him. They were so far away that Keith couldn't decipher what species they were, but they were quite large. Keith's hope that they were delectable prey was short-lived-- it wasn't until they moved around that Keith picked up on what they were: dogs.

Those were dogs, no doubt about it. The way they picked up their paws was bumbling, unlike the graceful manner in which deer moved. Coyotes had to be out of the picture, too; one of the figures was too stout to be a coyote, and the other had flopped-over ears. Keith had the primal urge to leap after them and chase them away from their territory (this was *their* territory, no one else was supposed to live in it). But when Keith blinked, they were gone.

"Uh, guys, did you see--" Keith started, but Madrone stood up on their haunches.

"Rabbit," they whispered. "Rabbit! Go!"

Keith felt his friends shove him aside to give chase. Indeed, out of nowhere, a huge jackrabbit hopped into view, assuming from one of the nearby shrubs. Keith was dazed, but his brain screamed for his legs to move, and so they did, but Madrone already had a hell of a head start. Luna, with her chubby body and short legs, did her best to keep up.

Luna was already panting. "Took it long enough."

Keith couldn't banter back this time. His legs were still in canter, not gallop, and he couldn't seem to get them to move faster. His mind's eye kept switching back to those figures. *Protect Luna and Madrone, keep them safe, they don't know better--*

"This thing's fast," Madrone said, gasping for breath, on the rabbit's tail but just not quick enough to grab it.

The wind was curved around Keith's flank, the grass tickling at his pads, and he wanted to gallop, he knew he could catch that rabbit, but once again, his anxiety was holding him back.

Tiny fangs scraped at his hindquarters. "Help Madrone out," Luna admonished.

"I'm trying-- I just can't--" Go faster.

Madrone sped up, their muscles rippling throughout their body, and Keith could almost feel the screaming pain in his own legs. "It has a burrow-- it's heading straight for its burrow!"

"Keith, it's time to get *moving*--" Luna rasped, in distress.

"I'm trying, I'm trying!"

"Trying isn't good enough," replied Luna, and out of the blue, teeth

sunk into Keith's behind. "Just do it already!"

Keith yelped in pain, and the flight system in his body activated. His body began to squash and stretch, and before he knew it, he was in full gallop, his jowls pursed together from the speed. He imagined that to his friends, all he appeared as was a blue-and-white blur, a missile heading straight for the prey. The prey wasn't even glancing back.

The grass was now fleecy soft on his paws. His coat was pressed close to his skin. His collar was silent-- he'd never run this fast before. All the tension in his body and mind had released, no, transferred, to this raw speed, this unprecedented power in his legs. The pain searing through his muscles didn't even faze him.

The burrow was fast approaching, the rabbit dead set on reaching its destination, Keith dead set on not letting that happen. *So close so close so close--*

He pushed and pushed, no longer feeling the grass, like he was running on air--

His mind cleared, it was quiet for once--

Keith reared, his jaws parted, baring his large fangs, and he leaped, his teeth sinking into the flesh of the rabbit. He dispatched it with a swift crunch to the spine, and it went limp, twitching in its throes. "Gotcha!"

His legs threatened to buckle under him from the wave of exhaustion that hit. Madrone limped over next to him, while Luna almost dragged herself by her front paws, plopping down onto the ground.

"Atta boy," Luna gasped, then shoved her muzzle into the grass.

Madrone looked just about as tired, and they laid down. "Thanks, Keith," they said, "you're a lifesaver."

Keith was inclined to agree, until he thought of the figures again.

No, his packmates wouldn't believe him. They never do. Hell, maybe they were coyotes, and he was just mistaken. No dogs lived here except them. That's what he was told. And that had to be right, didn't it?

--

On the way back to camp, they'd found a tad bit more prey: Madrone had nabbed a juvenile prairie dog, and Luna managed to flush a crow. Keith admired the talent his friends had for catching prey, especially for dogs who never really had the desire to-- even Madrone, whom unlike Luna and Keith, was born a stray, hiding in shadows away from human contact.

As they stopped for water at the nearby stream, Keith began to think about how they got here. Such an elaborate plan to escape the stress of human touch, only to spend half their medium amount of weeks down on the plains worrying about lack of food supply. Life was a difficult game to play, let alone win.

He only wanted the best for Luna and Madrone, after all the pack had been through. Luna's foul mood wasn't for no reason, and Madrone's stunted social signals gave them trouble growing from a pup to a juvenile. Keith flexed his paws, felt the bandages scratch at healed bite marks. He knew better than to rip them off, but he did want to see how well they healed.

He almost forgot about the figures he saw near the big oak.

The camp was a perfect resting spot: a rocky maw shrouded by clumps of fescue growing along the opening of the small cave. The interior was small and cozy, trapping in insulation with the moss and lichen surrounding the walls. It was safe from mountain lions and coyotes stumbling upon it, a seemingly tiny hole in the middle of a grassy rock quarry.

The whole of the acre beyond their view belonged to them. There were no fresh scent marks on any tree, especially none from dogs. Every oak was Luna's, Madrone's, and Keith's. Every blade of grass beneath their feet was their territory. The only place they hadn't set

foot in their line of sight was the pine forest sitting on the horizon.

Even Madrone and Luna, brazen as they were, seemed put off by that forest. Keith remembered Madrone mentioning something about their mother once living around there, but she no longer did; she instead resided on the border of the human residential area, skulking about out of human sight. Keith knew dogs had lived beyond that forest, but that was far away, as far away from the young dogs as possible. They had settled there, on those empty plains, at Madrone's mother's behest.

Keith shook his head and stepped into their cave. The ground felt cooling on his paws.

"Cave, sweet cave," he muttered to himself, plopping down onto his moss bed with a thump.

"You've got that right," Luna responded, muffled with the crow in her jaws. Keith was still impressed with the size of that thing, even though Luna sheepishly admitted it was probably already injured. She curled up on the moss next to Keith's, and Madrone followed suit, gently setting their catch on the pile of fresh kill.

Luna and Madrone flanked him, surrounding him with warmth. Drowsiness threatened to knock him out. His eyes shut.

"Falling asleep already?" Madrone giggled.

"No, I'm dying, help," Keith said. "Er, yeah, I'm fine, 'Drone. Sorry if you didn't catch that."

"I can't understand sarcasm," replied Madrone, voice thick with sarcasm.

Keith laughed and Luna's stumpy tail wagged. Madrone looked incredibly proud.

Silence fell for a few moments as the dogs huddled together, warming each other up. Luna's fleecy fur and Madrone's breathing really was making sleep tantalizing.

"Okay, rest's over, I'm starving," Madrone said, standing up and padding to the prey pile. They tossed Keith's rabbit over to his feet. "I assume we eat our own catches this time?"

"Seems only fair," Keith replied. "Or maybe Luna will attempt to sneak off with the foot of my rabbit like last time."

"Drop dead," Luna said with affection.

She curled around her crow and began to tuck in. In turn, Keith gnawed at his jackrabbit, and Madrone, their prairie dog. The gamey taste of the rabbit filled Keith's maw with drool-- a hearty reward for a difficult catch. But as he ate, he couldn't help but think about why it was so hard to catch it. Why his body froze up, why it couldn't run like he wanted it to.

To his left, Luna lifted her head, and her face was caked with feathers. The feathers very nearly resembled a human's beard. Keith's worrying immediately subsided and he doubled over with laughter.

"Luna," Keith howled, "your *face*."

"Ha ha. You're a riot." Luna rolled her eyes and scrubbed her muzzle down with a white paw.

Madrone was grinning, but their voice was impassive as ever. "It's not that funny."

"At least Maddy's on my side," Luna said, raising her chin.

"Keith's never on your side, Luna."

"Damn right he isn't."

When Keith got himself to stop wheezing, chest heaving in sighs, wetness in his eyes, he put on a face. "Not true. She just makes it too easy."

"He's got a point," Madrone conceded.

"Hey! Traitor." Luna made like she was about to pounce, but her hackles lowered and she tucked back into her crow with faux-angry huffs.

Keith's friends gave off a sense of tranquility, even as they bickered. This, Keith felt, was how it was meant to be for them. Their bond was tight, even for a dog pack, and you could see it in their eyes, even if their words seemed to betray them.

Madrone, still looking smug, wandered over to the gargantuan collection of flowers and plants that lit up the cave with color. The smorgasbord of plant life came in every shade of red, blue, gold, and violet-- at least, Keith thought so. He didn't know anything about flowers, other than their potency as poultices, when Madrone chewed up one of the marigolds and spread it on an infected pad. Madrone had a special affinity for the vibrant colors and sharp aromas.

"Hmm," said Madrone, examining the far right corner of flowers, meticulously organized by tints of blue. "I have a suggestion of what we should do today."

Keith stifled a belch; the rabbit was quite the meal. "I'm afraid to ask."

"You're always afraid," Madrone chuckled. "Why don't we try going to the forest today? There's bound to be tons more prey there."

Luna's eyes widened, but her fur didn't bristle. Keith, on the other hand, shot up. "I don't think so."

Madrone's smile faded. "Why not?"

"He thinks there're monsters," Luna responded.

"I-- I do *not* think there are monsters!" Luna would never let that go. Might as well admit the truth. "I saw... I saw something today, out in the plains. I'm pretty sure it was a couple of dogs."

Oh, God. Keith expected them to laugh hard. He was shocked to find that they didn't; in fact, they looked pensive. Luna and Madrone exchanged a glance.

"My mama said dogs don't live around here," Madrone replied, matter-of-fact. "They're on the far side of the forest, past the mountains."

Luna squinted to read Madrone's jowls, then nodded. "Besides, I didn't see them. I mean, obviously, I don't have eyes like yours, horseface. But wouldn't you think it's weird they'd suddenly show up? I'd say they were probably just coyotes."

Keith's lips pursed. Luna was right for once. They'd been here a month; if there were dogs, wouldn't they'd have seen some by now? The figures he'd seen weren't close to the forest, either. "One of them had flopped ears."

"Coyotes have those sometimes. It's rare, but it can happen," Madrone pointed out. "I don't think you're bluffing, Keith, but Mama kept telling me this place was safe. And Mama never lies."

"Auntie never lies," Luna confirmed.

"But," Madrone said, "We're not going if you don't feel comfortable. There's always tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day, and the next day--"

"We get it, Maddy," said Luna.

"Sorry."

Keith scratched at the blue patch on his shoulders. There was a part of him that was still apprehensive, but Luna and Madrone had a point. Coyotes did live around here, in the Barren Plains and the Mire near the creek. They'd even run into a couple of particularly docile and timid ones. Keith tried not to think about how little coyotes there were, and how little territory they had to call home, because that wasn't important right now.

A thick silence wafted through the cave before Keith sighed and said, "You guys are right. Let's go."

"You're sure?" Luna asked.

"I mean, Auntie really does tell the truth." Keith felt himself smile.

Madrone's sable coat was fluffed up, and their paws tapped the ground with glee. "Thanks, guys. Let's make this an adventure, huh?"

"It's quite the walk, so it's already an adventure," Luna giggled.

Keith dipped his head in agreement. "Let's hope there's far more rabbits there."

"Rabbits live on the plains, silly," said Madrone, already heading toward the cave entrance.

The bud of anxiety threatened to keep growing, but Keith nipped it. "Know-it-all."

--

The journey to the pine forest would take them at least till after high noon. The sun hung in the sky, but the dogs' shadows were still cast, so they had plenty of time.

While the pines stood as behemoths in person, they were only huddled specks of black in the distance. The trek would be arduous, maybe even treacherous. The pack had never come close to the darkness that Madrone's mother called Black Pine Forest, but perhaps that was what made the adventure so exciting to think about.

Keith had the same feeling in his toes as when they first stumbled upon the Oak Plains: that mixture of nervousness and wonder that made him want to bound either far away or straight toward what was before him. It made him freeze in place with the flurry of

thoughts zipping through his head, and Luna and Madrone had to shove him past the entrance to the cave.

"Off we go," Luna said, a lilt of apprehension to even her voice.

"Off we go," Madrone affirmed.

"Off we-- *hey!*" Luna and Madrone bounded off before Keith could even finish his own affirmation.
He could only shake his head and follow suit, not galloping, but transitioning from a jog to a canter in a second's time. Being a Greyhound had its benefits, Keith supposed.

The hilly plains proved a bit of a challenge to run across. There was that blip of smugness in Keith when he heard Luna and Madrone panting while he still had plenty of energy left.

"Horseface, wait up!" Luna shouted, her tiny paws *pat-pat-patting* on a slab of stone.

"That's what you get for leaving me behind. And stop calling me horseface; I don't have a *horse's face*."

"So try and run a little slower-- and yes, you do."

Keith rolled his eyes. "Madrone, do I have a horse's face?"

"Why must you drag me into this?" Madrone was giving Keith and Luna their best 'Madrone is disappointed in you' face that was a surefire way to silence their childish exchanges. And indeed, Keith and Luna gave each other a look before quieting down.

The dying grass and jagged rock was transforming into lush grass as they passed the stream. Golden wildflowers made the stretching plains shine, as though the sun was touching each blade of plantlife. To their left, mountains, a breathtaking shade of blue from the horizon coating them in color, stood firm, protecting the hills from openness.

The gold wildflowers gave way to dark purple, then a bright, milky

lavender, shaped like stars. Keith wondered what this landscape would resemble at night; right now, he felt like he was cantering across the Milky Way. This was the feeling of freedom he'd always longed for as he and Luna stood inside the fences of the foster care, wondering what running across wild grass would feel like underneath his paws.

"Black Pine Forest straight ahead!" Madrone's shout dragged Keith's head out of the clouds. Luna and Keith immediately sped up after them as they bounded toward the maze of towering trees. The air began to feel muggy and thick as they neared the forest. Keith was amazed; it had only taken them an hour tops to reach their destination. The sun hung in the middle of the cloudless sky, heating their backs, but that would soon give way to the constant shade and darkness of pines looming over them.

Madrone slowed to a halt when they stood before the first of the pine trees. They glanced back, the whites of their eyes showing.

"Here goes nothing," they said, and when Luna and Keith caught up to them, they took their first steps into the forest as a pack, a team.

Unfortunately, the jitter under Keith's skin awakened as soon as the pines darkened his vision. Just stay calm. They'd walked through a forest before, this was nothing new. The difference was that the friendly madrones that slumped toward the ground were now ominous pines that blocked the sun's rays. Keith nearly tripped over a lone pine log that had fallen over and passed on the ground, covered in lichen.

Luna let out an excited bark. "I smell birds," she squeaked.

"What kind of birds?" asked Madrone.

"The kind that fly and taste good, obviously," Luna responded. As they kept close, walking along the path made of fallen tree bark and dead pine needles, the normally friendly bright browns and greens of the madrone forest paralleled by the depressing dark olives of the pines, Luna turned to the mutt. "What kind of flowers are you looking for, anyway?"

"Purple milkweed," Madrone stated. "Super rare, don't grow well in sun. They actually look pink, not purple. They don't taste milky, either. Butterflies love them, and they're full of pollen, so..."

"Well, keep those things away from me, or I'll sneeze," Luna laughed.

Keith chuckled a bit, too. Madrone stopped near an opening where a few pine trees formed a circle. Small mossy rocks and probably noxious mushrooms directed the path of vision toward shrubs most likely carrying the flowers that Madrone was searching for.

Madrone looked straight toward the patches of pinks and purples that were scattered in the distance, sniffing at the air. "You guys just stay here, catch some birds. I'll just be a minute."

"But--" Keith started.

Madrone glanced at him, amber eyes meeting his brown. "I'll be fine, Keith."

And then they leaped off toward the bushels of flowers, not a care in the world. Keith's stomach churned. Luna sighed and gestured him over to where a nest was sitting precariously on the branch of a tree.

"You need to stop worrying for us," Luna said, snuffling at the ground, paw raised. "We can take care of ourselves, you know. Just because you're older and bigger doesn't make you our guardian."

"I'm still worried about those things I saw," Keith countered. He pawed at a pinecone, not even glancing toward the tweets coming from the nest. "There was too much going against the coyote theory, now that I think about it. And Madrone's mother hasn't lived down here in ages. What if she's wrong?"

"Auntie's never wrong."

"Well, what if that's not true? We need to stop trusting in everything

so blindly."

Luna spun around, looking agitated. "Ugh, Keith, will you just--"

Luna was cut off by a horrible noise, high-pitched and shrill. The birds flying toward the nest turned tail and fled. It took Keith a moment to register that it was a scream.

Madrone's scream.

Chapter Two

[image]

This chapter contains depictions of violence and a brief mention of animal abuse. Read with care.

[image]

Luna wished she'd believed Keith this time.

To be fair, Auntie really did know a lot about this place. Luna had reason to believe Madrone's mother lived among the wild dogs at some point in time, but she neither confirmed nor denied that information whenever it came up-- even when Madrone tried to pry. So why would she lie?

Luna's immediate instinct was to turn and run, far away from the scream she and Keith just heard. But that scream undoubtedly came from Madrone, their packmate, the backbone of the small team they made. Madrone was in danger. God, Luna wanted to cry, because for once, Keith's worrying wasn't for naught.

"Shit," was all Keith said before darting off in a gallop. Luna tried to yell for him to slow down, but her mind whirled in protest-- what if Maddie was in serious danger? She couldn't scent any dogs, though that would be the only reason that horrible yell would sound from them. She did her best to carry her weight on those tiny legs of hers and keep up with Keith, cantering into the bushes.

Madrone seemed to have ventured off farther than they'd said they would, because they were nowhere to be seen-- or heard. Luna could still scent them, but the scent was far off. They ran for what felt like miles.

"Don't worry, I can still..." Luna began, but she felt too sick to

continue. She stumbled up to Keith, who was pacing about. His ribcage was heaving. Sobs were sounding in his throat.

"This is all my fault," Keith wallowed. "I knew they were dogs. I gave in too fast. Now Madrone might be dead and because I didn't speak up--"

"No, you idiot, it's mine." Keith glanced at Luna when she interrupted him, his brown eyes glistening. Luna gulped; she hated how miserable she sounded. "I thought you were fretting again. I should have listened. I always should have li--"

Another yell from their left made Luna stop in her tracks. Madrone's scent was coming undeniably closer to them. Under the cover of pine branches, Luna and Keith couldn't see anything, but they ran toward the aromatic scent that their friend always seemed to carry on their pelt. The smell of lilacs was sickly sweet on Luna's nostrils, and it made her stomach flip. They passed by a cluster of the violet plants, bundled and crumpled on the forest ground. Madrone must have been taken far, because the cluster became a trail of petals.

Keith tripped over a branch, cursing as his long legs buckled under him. Luna turned tail to his aid. Keith was shuddering and gasping for breath.

"They're dead," Keith rasped. "They're gonna be eaten alive, I just know it."

"Get off your ass and keep running," Luna started before Madrone's alarmed yelp sounded behind them. She was about to respond when Madrone barreled into her and Keith, knocking them both over.

Madrone was as much out of breath as they were, but beyond their panting, they appeared far too terrified to be exhausted. Their tongue was lolling not only out of weariness, but also out of distress; the whites of their eyes were eclipses along their pinned pupils.

"Run," was all they said before they took off again, shoving past their packmates.

"Madrone!" yelled Keith, taking after them at the same time that Luna screamed, "Wait!"

Luna cursed the pudgy stomach she carried around with her on tiny stilted legs and matted fur. She ate to feel whole, as along with the gut, the weight of an empty and depressed feeling followed her around whereever she went. In this moment she wished and wished that she could be a fit breed like Keith, or sturdy like Madrone, not a useless sack of nothing.

"Wait up! Wait! Wait!" Luna frantically prayed to whatever kind of god dogs worshipped, if any, when Keith and Madrone let her catch up to them. Madrone appeared to be slightly limping on their hind leg. Brambles and pine needles cut their fur as they dashed away from whatever Madrone was running from.

"Madrone, what the hell happened?" Keith panted. "What was all that?"

A deep, growling bark stopped them in their tracks. Luna tumbled into Madrone, who tumbled into Keith. Luna picked up her muzzle, which felt heavy with dread.

Before them padded two huge figures. Thick coats, one brown and cream, one mottled blue. Muscle rippled throughout the bodies, and blazing yellow eyes shone in the growing dusk. They were gargantuan in size, even compared to Keith, who stood a good couple of heads taller than Luna. The brown dog had flopped-over ears and had a collar, but looked almost wolf-like in all other appearances. The other was stocky and stout and spitz-esque and had a mean-looking face.

Oh god. They were the figures Keith had described that morning.

The dogs stopped walking, putting a good twice legs-width of distance between the small pack and them.

The brown dog curled her lips, and it took Luna a minute to realize she was smiling. Her teeth were ugly and yellow and sharp, like a—

A wild dog's.

"There's a little pack of you, huh? You could've just said, odd-scent-mutt," she said. "Who're your friends?"

Madrone, Luna nor Keith responded. They cowered, shaking like leaves in the wind.

"Not the time for playing funny, Roxy," the blue dog grunted. He took a step forward, and that made Madrone pull back their teeth. "Oh. How about that."

"Stay away." Madrone's voice was stronger than usual, not the soft whisper it always seemed to be. "Please."

"They said *please!* Blu, this is a riot." The brown dog laughed and laughed. Her partner shoved her, not finding the situation as amusing as she did.

"Shut up."

"Don't tell me to shut up! I'm of higher rank than you are!"

"*Psh.* Like that matters. We're still scouts." The blueish dog shrugged and turned back to the quivering pups. "What, not gonna keep running? You're making this easy."

None of them seemed to find the willpower to speak up, not even Madrone, whose jowls were pursed in utter fear. They weren't pressed to the ground anymore, and Keith was even snarling, but Luna found that her legs were stiff, as though her paws were nailed to the ground. Maybe if they bared their teeth and growled enough, or maybe if they turned round and showed their bellies...

"You think they're Collbrandi spies?" The female scout-dog narrowed her eyes. Madrone stiffened, but Luna had no idea why. The word 'Collbrandi' had no meaning to her, and Madrone had never mentioned it before.

Keith raised his head, perhaps a bit too challenging. "What the hell is a *Collbrandi*?"

"Now they speak," the male snickered. "Nah, they wouldn't be from Collbrande. Some of 'em have collars, stupid."

"I dunno. Maybe Collbrande's trying out some new tricks. They're brutes, but crafty ones." The female hummed, sitting down and scratching at her cheek with her hind paw, as if the situation was some kind of casual joke. "Naw, but smell this one. Don't they smell like a Collbrandi?"

The female scout-dog stepped into Madrone's bubble, to which Madrone let out a warning snarl, but she kept going, leaning in to snuffle at their fur. Madrone dug their claws into the earth, eyes wild; Madrone hated when they were touched or sniffed without warning. When the blue scout-dog followed suit and began to sniff them, their flank was heaving harder than Luna had ever seen it. As they got closer, Luna noticed pine needles on their pelts, masking their scent.

"Yeah, they do." The blue scout-dog nodded, ignoring Madrone's distress. "What do you think? Exile?"

"Nah. Maybe Nomad's kid? Looks too young to trek all the way from the Capital." The brown scout-dog wouldn't move from where she was standing-- not but a few hairs away from Madrone.

Keith snapped his jaws. "Leave them alone."

The female turned to face him. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," Luna felt herself choke out. Her voice was weak and wavering. "Get out of here... this is... our territory."

"No wonder all the trees smell like a puppy's piss," the female snarked. "No, no. You're coming with us. This is Angiran territory. Nikita's coming over here soon; we have to clear the area." She turned to her companion and accidentally--or, maybe on purpose--shoved Madrone, which made them caterwaul and sink their teeth

into her hind leg. She let out a startled bark. "What the--?"

Madrone was drooling, eyes cherry-red with rage; Luna had never been so terrified of, and for, her friend before. She let out a shout when the scout-dog kicked Madrone off of her leg and into a nearby tree trunk. Madrone choked, the breath knocked right out of them.

"*You curs!*" Keith sprung into action then, leaping off the ground with all four feet and knocking the female scout off her own. In an instant, the male bit down on Keith's side, drawing blood, and threw him into the dirt with his fore paws.

The female scout-dog limped toward Luna. "What about you, spaniel? You wanna fight, too?"

She couldn't. She couldn't fight. Fighting meant blood, and tasting the blood of a dog would mean--

Out of nowhere she's snapped up in a pair of jaws and thrown into a pine tree. Pain shrieks throughout her body, and when she hits the ground, she struggles to take a breath.

"Easy, Roxy," the male said, "we're here to rough 'em up, not kill 'em."

"Whatever." The female makes to come closer to Luna, but she's sent barreling by Madrone once more, this time in a flurry of fangs, claws, and fur. *Snap, snarl, chomp.*

Luna stared on as Madrone clashed their teeth against the scout-dog's. Their paws were scrabbling for purchase; Madrone had the scout-dog pinned with their weight, but she landed a kick to the gut and Madrone gasped. The fluffy blue male tore at Keith's flank as Keith clawed and lashed at his eyes. Through her weak ears she could hear the shrieks and howls of dogs fighting. Her friends occasionally locked eyes with her, but nothing saying for her to fight along with them. Though she knew she could move, felt her paws tap along the ground, her inner voice told her to stay put, don't spill blood. She felt totally and utterly helpless.

Keith seems to find an opening in the fight, and shoves the blue scout-dog into a rock with utmost violence, leaving him to scream in agony.

"*My shoulder!*" The blue dog howled; Luna could hear an awful clicking sound, which was coming from his bummed foreleg. Through his misery blue scout-dog slammed his apple shaped head into Keith's with a crack, and Keith crumpled into a pile of pine needles.

"Keith!" Madrone and Luna screeched in unison. The brown dog cried out for her partner in the same vein, then snarled low, vengeful.

"You're gonna pay for that." The female let out a war cry as she bit down on Madrone's scruff while Madrone screamed, kicking them in the stomach and dragging them across the forest floor. That was enough for Luna to be sent into a berserk rage and flung her body into the rib cage of the scout-dog's.

Madrone and Keith lay in bloodied piles of themselves on the ground, and the blueish male wasn't much better. Only Luna and the brown dog still stood. The brown scout-dog padded closer, seeming to revel in the terror that was coming off Luna and Madrone and Keith in waves, her yellow teeth bared.

"You kids are really pissing me off," she snarled deep in her throat. Her thick-furred companion let out another pitiful whimper when he attempted to rise to all four feet but subsequently collapsed back down into the dirt.

Luna's eyes were transfixed on the brown dog, pink collar silent; the adornments were tucked into the inside of it. The dog moved with exact precision, the only sound she made came from her claws clacking with the bits of gravel scattered across the ground beneath. Luna's vision was blurry, but she could make out the lean muscle rippling underneath the dog's pelt. A nose was thrust in her face, and the air became rank with the smell of breath.

"This was supposed to be an easy mission," the scout-dog said. "Now

I have to go and grovel to Nikita like a whelp, how we got our asses beat by a punch of *puppies*." She kicks the dirt, snaps her teeth in Luna's face. "I'm really tempted to just kill you and your friends right now. You won't stop me, will you?"

Luna wasn't sure if the scout-dog was still taunting her; even if she was screaming in Luna's better ear, the only sound Luna could decipher was the blood pounding in her skull. She'd have to taste blood again if she wanted Madrone and Keith to live. If she wanted herself to keep on living. It wasn't fair. Life wasn't fair. It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair, it wasn't fair.

She curled in on herself, letting her stomach completely touch the ground, her hackles and shoulders coiled. Eye contact wasn't an option at this point if she wanted to keep her head. Stay there, take it. Look for an opening. No more running.

Luna felt calm, and the air had a strange finesse to it, like a gentle, friendly human hand petting her downy fur. Sharp teeth and a twisted nose were thrust into her line of vision again, and she lunged.

Blood soaked her tongue in an instant. Luna could feel her canines meet and her incisors sink into soft, wet flesh. Her paws were lifted off of the ground and there was a horrible gurgling noise.

"G-get off me!" The air was punched out of Luna's lungs as the scout-dog flung her into a tree, but to everyone's surprise--even Luna's--Luna did not let go. Instead, she sank her teeth in further, her upper fangs meeting bone. The scout-dog let out another shriek, attempting to alleviate her agony by dragging Luna across the gravel, pointy rocks scraping skin. "Get off me, *get off me, get off me!*"

Primal instincts took over, and Luna snarled, bracing her forepaws on the scout-dog's cheeks, latching on with claws. In her mind's eye, Madrone lay in a pool of their own blood, and Keith was still, a dent in his head, and Luna roared through the mound of cracked skin and fur in her mouth. Her true vision was fogged over with the scout-dog trying her hardest to fling her off, to no avail. Something

in Luna pushed her to keep her grip, a terrible rumble of a voice; hardly a voice, the bellow of a beast.

She was expecting a human hand to come down onto the back of her head and the stinging taste of peppermint soap to seep into her mouth, but no such punishment ever came. A hard body from the left smashed into her, and Luna was forced to let go, tumbling to the ground, a bundle of bloodied flesh still between her jaws. Flecks of scarlet masked the line of her visual perception, but the haze behind her eyes faded away. The familiar scents of Madrone and Keith wafted toward her.

"You little--! You *disgusting* little--!" Luna had almost forgotten the scout-dogs were still there when
Madrone and Keith helped her to her feet, their presence easing her out of her headspace. The blueish scout-dog looked on, mortified, when the brown scout-dog lifted her paw from her nose, and Luna, too, desired so much to collapse and pass out: most of the brown scout-dog's nose was no more; instead, an ugly gash replaced where one of her nostrils was. Blood flew everywhere, spilled down from the scout-dog's mouth to her chest to her feet. The scout-dog's eyes were red with rage and horror and when she made contact with Luna's gaze, she screamed, "What did you *do to me?*"

Luna's legs wouldn't give nor wouldn't let her turn and show her belly. "I didn't—I don't—"

"Luna," a voice that Luna eventually recognized as Keith said behind her. "Come on. We've gotta get out of here."

Dazed, she only nodded, and followed blindly, but not before Roxy and Blu, the scout-dogs, began to give chase. Luna's legs felt feather-light when she was beckoned by Madrone and Keith to run away.

"Over there!" Madrone was headed for a fallen pine log-- the same one that stuck out from the entrance to the forest and Keith tripped over. Part of it was hollow, to Luna's surprise.

The pack crammed as far into the hollowed log as their bodies

would allow. Madrone let out a gasp of pain when a splinter poked into an open wound. Keith's breathing was heavy, but Luna was too far into her own head to remember to remind him of his techniques. She guessed they would have to have panic attacks next to each other.

"Luna, Keith, are you guys okay?" Madrone asked.

Before either could respond, a snarling muzzle burst its way into a hole in the log. It frothed and drooled, and Luna let out a scream.

"Where's that spaniel?" The muzzle bellowed, and when blood seeped into the drool, Luna realized it was Roxy. "I'm gonna *flay* her!"

Another muzzle burst through -- Blu's -- and the pack was forced into the corner of the log, shrieking for their lives, spit and blood flying everywhere in the dark. Luna shut her eyes. They were dead. Keith was right. They were dead.

"I love you guys," Keith whispered. Luna began to sob.

Roxy's muzzle speckled blood in Luna's watery eyes. It inched closer and closer with the wood from the log splintering and giving way. The snapping maw shoved its way through, letting out noises of pain and rage. Teeth clinked on Luna's collar. That was it.

The muzzle stopped. It was pulled backward, the wood crackling, and it disappeared entirely. Luna had no idea what just happened. Blu, too, was flung out of the log with a yell. Pawsteps thudded, there was a scuffle, and then there was silence.

A bigger muzzle replaced Roxy's in the big, splintered hole.

"It's alright. You can come out," it said in a booming yet calm voice. "We're not going to hurt you."

Luna looked at Keith, who looked at Madrone. Keith mouthed, "what the hell?" when Madrone started to squirm their way through. Then Keith mouthed, "Madrone! No!"

"That's it," the booming voice assured them. Keith and Luna exchanged another glance; Madrone shoved their behind in Luna's face.

The small pack shuffled out of the hollowed log, one by one, bark hanging from their pelts and pricking into their skin. They each gave themselves a shake; Luna gave herself the hardest to clear the haziness from behind her eyes. Her breathing was still uneven.

When Luna looked up, a dog she didn't recognize was staring down at them.

"I suppose you're the pack they were going after," the dog said.

The dog barely even looked like a dog; Luna identified him as one by his strong male-scent. Thick rolls of skin piled on top of his withers, and his face was slung low on his skull. Slobber mingled with the scout-dogs' blood on his meaty jowls. Muscles rippled all throughout his wrinkled body. Atop his thick physique, his fur was a coarse gold, darker by his face, paws and tail. Two ugly scars parted the fur across one of his beady brown eyes; they appeared fresh and newly healed. Four other dogs, smaller than he was, stood behind him. Light coming from beyond the thick pine trees dappled their coats and made Luna squint. The way the other dogs signaled to him, he was their leader.

"I," Keith was trembling before this beast of a fellow canine. The way those eyes bored deep into Luna's soul, analyzing them, gave her shivers, too. "Yes. Yes. We are. Yes."

The dog gave a deep nod. "You're hurt," the dog said, and Luna noticed that his mouth was a dark blue, with sharp and jagged teeth.

Madrone responded, "We're fine. I think."

"So, you're..." Luna's curled lips began to settle.

"Consider me your hero. I am Shark," the big dog announced,

"Alpha of Collbrande."

The grand statement garnered no response from the small pack, only a long, awkward silence. Shark shuffled his feet, looking confused and embarrassed.

"Does this not mean anything to you?" Shark had a lilt in his gruff voice.

Something clicked in Luna's foggy head. She had heard the word 'Collbrande' before-- from the scout-dogs. It had no meaning then. It hardly had a meaning now, but at least it was beginning to make sense: Collbrande was a pack of some sort.

"Collbrande is a pack?" Keith spoke up, voicing her thoughts.

Shark wagged his tail for a quick moment, but suppressed it, most likely for his own dignity. "Bigger than any pack you will ever see in your lifetime."

"So... you're not here to kill us?" Part of Luna's mind was still blood, kill, claret-red. It was getting on her nerves. "Why else would you be on our land?"

Shark's eyes narrowed. "Your land? This is Civilization territory, claimed by Laelaps long ago. This land was never free to claim."

"Laelaps..." Madrone seemed to taste the name on their tongue. Their brows furrowed. "But... Mama said..."

Keith took a brave step forward, teeth bared. "There were never any dog-scents here," he challenged. "This land was ours as soon as we marked it, Laelaps or no Laelaps."

The dogs behind Shark gasped and barked.

"He spoke lowly of Laelaps!" said a brown female.

"Does he not know of the Civilization?" whispered a golden dog that seemed to be related to the female.

A tricolor hound scoffed. "Stupid pet dogs, don't even know their own culture--"

"*Shut up!*" Shark roared, and with that, the guard dogs closed their maws. "I know this may come as a shock, but this land? It is not your land." The certainty in the large dog's voice made Luna flinch. "It is land Angira is meaning to take as its own, despite it being shared for years. It is so far from the Capitals that very rarely do dogs venture here. But Angira does not mean well, as you can tell from these buffoons." Shark beckoned to the unconscious Scouts and took a deep breath. "I'm afraid my Guards and I will have to escort you all out of here."

The ground beneath Luna's paws wavered. No! That couldn't be possible! All the trouble and hardship Luna, Madrone, and Keith had gone through to make it to their new home -- and that was it? They'd been there for almost a new moon, and they just had to leave?

"Do we at least have time to say goodbye?" Luna's mouth moved, and words came out, but she could barely recognize her voice as her own.

"Unfortunately not. We will be detaining these Scouts as soon as possible, before more Angirans can come here."

"But! But my..." Madrone slumped over, their paws buckling under them, and began to cry. "My flowers..."

Shark cocked his head, gesturing from his Guards to Luna's packmate. "What's wrong with them?"

"They're crying because we can't see what we worked for ever again!" Keith snapped. His defensive posture was so unlike him; Luna hadn't seen it before their fight earlier.

The tricolor Guard shoved his face in Keith's. "Watch your mouth, Greyhound."

"Viper." Shark took a breath, and turned to Madrone, even so far as crouching down to meet their gaze. "Not to worry, young one. Where we will be going, there will be so many flowers you won't know where to start picking."

"Really?" Madrone looked at Shark with big, watery eyes. "What kinds?"

"Oh," Shark sing-songed, "morning glories, star flowers, milkweed--"

"Milkweed! Guys, they have milkweed!"

"Time is passing by as we speak," one of the Guards, a grey mutt with a torn ear, groused.

"Can... can we just take a minute to talk?" Keith said to Shark. The Guard dogs bristled, but Keith ignored them. "Just me and my pack? Please?"

"We have to leave!" The brown female said urgently.

Shark shrugged off the Guards. "As you wish," he sighed.

The pack hurried into a small circle, faces pushed against each other. Luna could feel the eyes of the Guards on her back.

"We're. Freaking. Dead." Keith whispered, strained.

It wasn't as though Keith was lying, but Luna assumed another scenario. The Guards and Shark did not seem hostile.

"I... I don't think they're going to kill us," Luna found herself saying. "They offered Madrone more flowers, didn't they?"

"Yeah," Madrone spoke up. "I mean, it's not like we're safe here..."

Keith narrowed his brown eyes. "You don't trust them, Luna, and you know it."

"No, I don't. But what other choice do we have?"

Madrone looked like they were going to cry again. "Guys--"

"Time's up!" The deep voice barked behind them, cutting Luna and Keith's silent conversation with their eyes off. When the pack dispersed, lined up neatly, Shark leaned in. "Well?"

Keith was the one who spoke for them once more. With a lopsided nod, he said, "Alright."

"The journey will be arduous. We will help you catch prey on the way. Our path leads us to the Rattlesnake's Tail River, which cuts across Collbrandi territory, so no need to worry about water."

"What about the pet dogs' collars?" The tricolor Guard -- Luna recalled his name was Viper -- asked his leader.

"Hush, Viper!" Shark may as well have closed Viper's lips with his paws, the way Viper's maw clicked shut. "Now... what are your names, young ones?"

Luna found herself the first to speak. "Luna."

"Keith."

"Madrone, sir."

The Guards nodded. Luna noticed that the grey and tricolor Guards were eyeing them with keen interest.

"Well, Luna, Madrone, Keith," Shark bellowed, head raised. "Let us begin."

And so the life Luna and her packmates knew came to an end, then and there. They didn't even get a chance to look back.

Chapter Three

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Light dappled the ground beneath Madrone's paws and heated their pelt. When they looked up, it felt like the sun was staring down at them through the bustle of pine needles and branches, glaring with its fierce light. Their legs were moving, and they were going somewhere, that was for sure, but to where they hadn't a clue. Luna and Keith drudged behind them. The wounds on Keith's flank seemed severe enough to warrant a stop and check. But when Madrone signaled to speak to Shark, the mysterious leader of this enigmatic pack of dogs, the golden wolf-dog gave a warning growl.

The smell of fear was coming off of Madrone and their friends in droves. It made Madrone self-conscious; too self-conscious, to the point where they wanted to turn tail and run away in shame. They recalled their mother's words. *You don't emote like other dogs do. Be mindful of that.*

To Madrone's dismay, Shark turned his meaty head to the dogs and said, "A real dog masks its fear-scent with its marker-scent."

Madrone looked at Luna, who looked at Keith.

"What does that even *mean?*" whispered Luna. Keith gave a shrug, and Madrone shook their head. The brown wolf-dog guard snapped their teeth, and the small pack dispersed.

The forest was a winding path of gargantuan pine trees that towered above everything, dwarfed only by the tallest of mountains. If one were to fall, it would be like a dog crushing an ant under its paw. Madrone's pelt gave a shudder to prevent their brain from spiraling again. The place that Shark and his unnamed dogs were taking them to had better have those flowers.

The light spilling out from behind the trees was the only way Madrone --and they assumed for the other dogs, too -- could see beyond their own fore paws. The Black Pine Forest was well and truly black as night. Bluebirds darted from tree to tree with great clumsiness, and different types of fungi grew plentifully on the forest floor. Black chantarelles, stinkhorns, truffles. Madrone found themself drawn to them. Some might have been edible. Madrone's stomach growled and their pelt grew hot with embarrassment.

"The odd-scent is hungry," the grey schnauzer-mix Guard said with a snicker. Madrone looked away. "Shall we hunt for them, sir?"

Shark suddenly stopped and sniffed at the ground. "It has been a long afternoon for them." When he looked up, his Guards stiffened and raised their heads. "Crystal, Timberwolf," he signaled to the brown female and the schnauzer-mix, "Find the children some squirrels."

"Sir, with all due respect, we're not technically children," Keith uttered.

The golden odd-scent dog snarled. "Never challenge the words of our Alpha, *kid*."

"Easy, Sol. Crystal, rein in your sibling for once." Shark rolled his eyes. Crystal nodded and proceeded to scold her litter-mate. "You are right, ah... Keith. Yes, Keith. I do apologize. Your pack mate, however, this Madrone... they seem a bit young."

Oh, great. Now all the spotlight was on Madrone. Their eyes darted back and forth, from Shark to the leery gazes of the Guards.

"I was born during the last autumn," they said, their paws trembling. They could feel their tail want to dart in between their hind legs. *Please stop staring at me.*

Shark pursed his jowls and nodded. He signaled to Crystal and Timberwolf again. "Go on, now. Squirrels."

That was all the Guards needed; they headed off in opposite directions as though they were familiar with the forest's labyrinth. Viper and Sol mulled, the unconscious bodies of the Angiran Scouts, bloodied and beaten swollen, on their backs.

"Rest for a moment," Shark said to Luna, Madrone and Keith. "You especially, little black one. You seem... disturbed."

"Uh," Luna said. She hesitated, then slowly curled up on the ground and buried her muzzle in her paws. Madrone looked at Keith and knelt down beside her, flanking her. Whatever was going through Luna's head, it wasn't anything that Madrone could decipher on their own.

Shark sat down with a soft thud, his remaining Guards standing still as posts, not looking even the slightest bit uncomfortable with the weight of dogs on their croups.

"Where," Shark began, "did you come from, exactly?"

None of Madrone's pack responded. Upon being prompted with a prod of a paw by the Guard named Viper, Keith shuffled his paws and stood up.

Keith cleared his throat and took a breath. "Luna and I are from the Human territory. Foster care. Madrone is a wild dog."

"Human territory? That still exists?" Shark raised a brow. "I thought it had all been destroyed during the Disaster."

The Disaster. Where had Madrone heard that term before? They swore they could hear their mother saying it in their memories.

"Pardon for asking, sir," Keith said, "but what is the Disaster?"

"My, this pack is uncultured," Shark muttered under his breath. Viper and Sol gave each other a glance. "The Disaster is what led the Civilization to be created. It was an event that killed humans, dogs, cats... everything. No one knows what it was, or what it came from."

"Wait, that's what the Disaster is?" Madrone found themself speaking up, to their objecting brain. "My mother was a survivor of it and she--"

The conversation was interrupted when muffled barks sounded to their right and left. The grey Guard, Timberwolf, had a squirrel in his mouth, while the brown Guard, Crystal, had an enormous skunk limp in her own.

"Excellent catch, Guards." Shark dipped his head to his subordinates as they gave their prey to Madrone and their pack. Upon the scent of the squirrel wafting into Madrone's nostrils, they tore into the stomach of the prey, savoring each bite. It had been a long winter, and it would be an even longer spring, they realized.

"Wish my fangs were as sharp as that girl's. That Scout had quite a wound," Crystal said, beckoning to Luna. Luna cringed. No more words were spoken.

To Madrone's surprise, Shark did not rush the pack to consume their meal. Instead, he made small talk with his Guards, even laughing at a joke Timberwolf made. It was... creepy, somehow. There were things that didn't add up. Evidently Keith seemed to think the same, as he whispered into Madrone's and Luna's ears, "How did that Guard know about that?"

Luna perked up at that. "Know about what?"

"The... thing you did." Keith's shoulders seized up. "You know. To the Scout."

Luna made a weird groaning sound in the back of her throat. Keith lurched his neck back. Something wasn't right. Madrone asked, "Are you guys okay?"

"I'm fine," Keith responded, but he didn't make eye contact with Madrone like he usually did. Madrone's shoulders sagged. Luna didn't reply at all. Her eyes were gaunt and sunken into her head, as though she had been crying. Maybe she was crying, and like

always, Madrone wasn't aware enough to notice.

Madrone cursed in their head. "Okay." They turned over, facing their head in the opposite direction of their friends.

Viper, the hound Guard, padded over to the small pack with a head held high. Madrone tried not to stare at the ugly scars painting his breast in red and pink. The blue Scout wasn't on his back this time; he must have been taking turns with the other Guards holding them.

"Alpha says it's time to head out again. The sun will set soon," he said curtly. His eyes, a blazing amber, bore down on Madrone. Madrone stifled a shiver.

Keith beckoned to Luna and flanked Madrone, and they set out to follow Shark and the Guards. Madrone's paws ached; they hadn't felt this much pain in their pads since the journey to the Plains...

Jolting out of the memory, Madrone focused on the plantlife that grew around the forest to take the ease off of the agony. The trees were firs, with potent-smelling needles that could mask any dog-scent. It overwhelmed their nostrils and they had to take breaths through their mouth occasionally. Snakeberry flowers grew at the base of the behemoth trees-- in small doses, snakeberry was a potent cure for ailments. Bushes that Madrone couldn't identify were all over the forest, and Madrone yearned to bound over and smell them, but the Guards kept a close eye on the small pack. All Madrone could do was look and wonder.

The sun grew stronger through the pines and the forest was lit up as much as it could be. At least Madrone didn't have to keep their eyes wide open to take in their surroundings and not walk into a tree. The day was already coming to an end, and what a day it was. Madrone's pack hadn't lived on the Plains for more than a new moon.

Eventually, the sun began to set, and the light spilling through illuminated everything. When Madrone looked up from their paws, they could see that the forest's path was coming to an end by the

way light shone white in the distance. The bright white grew closer and closer, and before Madrone knew it, the dogs had reached the end of Black Pine Forest. When Madrone looked back, the Plains were nowhere to be seen.

Shark stopped in his tracks at the base of the forest's end, and stood like a statue before his Guards and Madrone's pack. When Madrone walked up to see what he was standing behind, Shark turned his head as well.

"Welcome to Collbrande."

Beyond Shark and his Guards was something Madrone had only heard about in tales: sprawling, neverending lush green grass illuminated by twilight sun. A long river cut through the marshland like a winding scar. The marshes were flanked by green-brown mountains that cradled the Capital within itself. Pine trees were few and far between, just like out on the Plains. The land stretched beyond the horizon and prey darted from one point to another in blazing speed.

More importantly, there were dogs: packs upon packs of them, separated only by the territory itself, eating and playing and rolling around in the grass. Small packs, large packs, packs of toy dogs, packs of molossers, packs of both. They were unified by their scent, the scent of Collbrande, which was overpowering. Madrone had never seen this many dogs in their entire life! And the fact that they were mingling together and minding their own business, all settled on the same patch of land-- it seemed impossible. It was impossible.

"These are all your dogs? *This* is your pack?" Keith's eyes were blown black.

Shark chuckled and brushed his shoulder against Keith. "Oh, son, they belong to their own packs, but we all share the same scent of Collbrande. Collbrande is a pack of packs, if you will."

And that was true: when Madrone and Shark and the others climbed down the slope separating Collbrande's Capital from the forest, the swampy scent of Collbrande was all Madrone could

smell. It would be a while before they would get used to it.

"How do you get them to follow you?" Madrone asked, a little timid.

Viper nodded over to Shark. "Our Alpha is the strongest dog in the Civilization. He is the only dog that is powerful enough to stand up to Nikita."

"Indeed. Nikita is the Leader of Angira, the cowardly human-lickers. She and her Judges *copied* my idea of the Super-Pack, thinking they own this *whole Civilization."* Shark's voice grew more and more aggressive with every word. Madrone flinched. Shark took a deep breath.

"Angira--" Shark motioned his golden head toward the mountainscape that towered above all the rest of the land "--is separated from us by those mountains. We share the Mountains, for they were bestowed to us by Laelaps."

Shark, the Guards, and Madrone's pack walked along the grasslands. Madrone bit their bottom jowl when they looked down and saw flowers, flowers that they'd never seen before. They tried to stop and pick one with their teeth, but a Guard shoved their hindquarters and made them keep walking.

Dogs began to gather, and Madrone's neck lurched back into their shoulders when they stared like Madrone was an animal that couldn't exist. None of the dogs had collars, just like Keith had pointed out. Grass and mud pelted their coats, and the normally white-coated dogs were dyed a creamy brown with dirt.

"What the hell is that stench?" One dog barked, wrinkling his snout in disgust.

"Those're *collars!* What're *Angirans* doin' on our land?" Another snarled. Muzzles poked into Madrone's safety bubble. Their chest began to heave.

Shark's Guards pushed the small pack along while Shark looked at them and said softly, "Ignore them. My dogs mean no harm."

Madrone wasn't convinced. With the way Luna and Keith appeared frozen in fear, they weren't either.

"It's getting late. Come, young ones, I'll show you your new beds." Shark beckoned the Guards, Angiran Scouts in tow, to another part of the Capital. The four Guards nodded and walked to where Shark's nose was point.

"So... we're staying here forever? Is that the plan here?" Madrone asked, still on edge from the Collbrandi dogs gawking at them.

Shark's nose was thrust at Madrone, blue mouth secreting stinky breath. "Address me with more respect."

"Sorry..." Madrone whispered. "...Sir."

And then Shark's expression softened like nothing had happened. They kept walking toward a quarry. "That is indeed the plan. Come."

Shark stopped at the edge of the quarry. "I made sure to free up a den for you all."

Madrone surveyed the den. It was a hole in the side of a large rock, covered in moss and lichen. The inside was humid for some odd reason, like dogs had been here beforehand, but Madrone couldn't pick up their scent. It actually did look a lot like their old cave on the Plains. Part of Madrone thought that was suspicious, but it was most likely just a coincidence.

"I will show you the territory tomorrow morning." Shark dipped his head and turned to leave when the pack had padded into the den. But before he walked away, he poked his head in and said cheerfully, "Happy dreams!"

The pack was left to their own devices. Prey -- bluebirds, a squirrel, and a rabbit -- lay at the mouth of the den. They each picked up food and settled in their moss-beds.

Keith was eating hungrily, but Luna only pawed at her bluebird like it was festering, making a face. Madrone looked at her. "Hey, it'll be alright. It'll probably just be like play fighting. C'mon, eat."

Luna lurched away, expression twisted. "I'm not hungry anymore."

"Well, there goes my opportunity to be the optimistic one." Madrone sighed. They looked up, jaw clenched. "We should... talk about this."

"What is there to talk about? Our lives are ruined." Luna's lips were tight. It looked like she was about to sob.

"We *never* talk. About *anything*." Madrone withheld tears burning behind their eyes, wanting to fall. "We eat, we sleep, maybe together, but I don't know what you guys are thinking right now. And that'd be *helpful*, if we're supposed to be a pack."

There was silence. Madrone's chest was heaving in what they figured out to be rage.

"Madrone, just... leave it be." Keith looked down at his paws. "Luna's right."

"She's--" Madrone started, but they closed their jaws. They didn't want to offend their friends, but why didn't they understand? How were they a pack if their bond wasn't strong enough? Wasn't that the point of a pack in the first place?

"Fine," Madrone muttered, turning their back and tucking into their prey. "You know I'm the one who's right, not Luna."

They could feel glares on their fur, but they ignored it. It was a long day.

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Madrone dreamt of jaws snapping, drool and fur flying, teeth sinking into soft flesh. With every twitch of their paw, there was another whump of a body hitting the ground in their mind's eye.

When their eyes closed they could still see red splattered along in the black. Phantom pains throbbed in their legs, in their flank, and behind their lids.

They sat up in their moss-bed, blinking grogginess out of their eyes. It was the middle of the night. Luna and Keith were deep in slumber. Madrone felt a twinge of frustration when they remembered their conversation that evening.

If Madrone had to tell the truth, they had never fought a real battle before, even though they'd been a stray their whole life. Madrone knew they weren't the only one that was deeply affected by that whole ordeal, but at least they tried talking it out.

Madrone looked back at their sleeping pack mates and they huffed, turning to the maw of the den. *Whatever*, they thought. *They were just being stupid. They'll figure out I'm right soon enough.*

They stepped out, breathing in the night air, crisp and clean, free from Human stench. Even the Plains had Human scent crawling all over the place, considering it was close enough to Human territory. There, in the heart of Collbrande, the only scent was that of dog. A drop of water from the mouth of the hole landed on Madrone's pelt and they jumped, giving themselves a hearty shake. On the top of the den there was a flat stretch of grass surrounded by some pebbles and rocks. Madrone looked around the opening of the den for a way to climb up. They found a rather steep slope that was feasible enough to walk up, and with the exception of a few times where their paws scrabbled on dirt, they managed to climb to the top. The grass was cool and lush on their journey-worn pads.

The sky was strewn with stars that night. Madrone's eyes picked at them, one by one, analyzing their colors like they would the leaves on a tree or the flowers in a wide field. It was truly a spectacle. They lay, bathed in transparent white, in the grass and gazed up at the never ending ocean of constellations.

Keith and Luna were deep sleepers, and Madrone felt a twinge of envy whenever they thought about it. Madrone tossed and turned and stretched just to get comfortable. Their mind would race and

race, sort of like how Keith's would, but Keith's was different somehow. He could quiet his mind when the moon came up, but Madrone's train of thought would never end. Always flowers, or medicinal herbs, or the textures of tree bark. They loved it, loved thinking about all of it, and yet they wished it would shut up for once.

"Penny for your thoughts?" As though Luna could read Madrone's mind, she whispered out to them, tiny paws making little sound as she padded up to their flank.

"Can't sleep?" Madrone asked her. She was initiating conversation now, they noticed. She shrugged.

"Bad dream," is all she said, curling up beside them. Madrone nodded in solidarity. "I repeat, penny for your thoughts?"

Madrone squirmed, feeling hot for no discernable reason. "Oh. I'm alright." *'Alright'* was subjective, but Madrone wasn't up to arguing with their emotions. "Just can't sleep again. Bad dream, too."

Luna began to lap at her paw. "Does this look infected?" She held out her right paw, pad up. Madrone leaned over to study it.

They drew their nose over the pad, snuffling, prodding for inflamed skin. The sole of the pad was a tad hot, a crack down the middle, but nothing too serious for Madrone to be alarmed. "Just rub some marigold on it and you'll be fine."

Luna withdrew her paw and muttered thanks. She stared at it for a few moments. Her jowls drooped. "This one scratch just doesn't wanna go away." She gave a crooked grin and turned her paw inward and out. Madrone was focused intently on how focused she was. "Like it's bad enough I won't be forgetting what happened, there has to be some kind of physical representation of it. Life's an ass like that."

"Mm. Yeah." Madrone didn't want to seem like they weren't paying attention -- they just didn't want to talk about it. Not again. Maybe not ever again. Forgetting would have been nice, if even possible.

Luna huffed a rueful laugh. "Surprised I escaped with both ears." A silence fell for just a heartbeat. Luna turned to Madrone. "You ever wonder how your mom's doing?"

Madrone was about to answer *of course, why wouldn't I*, when it hit them.

They hardly ever thought about Sycamore, their mother.

When Madrone did, it was in passing, to recall other memories. Sometimes they thought about the parvo that killed their siblings. Sometimes, the encounter with the rabid coyote. But never really their mother. Madrone hadn't a clue why. They loved their mother -- perhaps a bit too much. It had taken days for Madrone to fully accept that their mother wouldn't be coming with them, Luna and Keith to the Plains. For many months of their short life, their mother was all Madrone had.

It disturbed Madrone to realize that Luna and Keith had basically replaced Sycamore's role, in a way. Madrone never bonded with their brothers and sisters, anyways, so Luna and Keith filled that place in Madrone's life, too.

"I, uh," Madrone uttered, "kinda do, yeah. I hope she's doing okay without me."

"She's a strong dog," Luna assured them. "I think she's doing just fine. She went through a lot."

Madrone chuckled. "Tell me about it."

And there was silence for many minutes. For a heartbeat, Madrone could feel their eyelids sag just a tad, and their muscles relax. The inside of the cave was insulated and warm from all the body heat. Sleep sounded so tempting. The nightmares, however, kept them from being pulled into the tantalizing blackness.

"Crud, I'm falling asleep." Madrone gave themselves a shake, just enough to clear the fog from their head.

"Yeah. I know how you feel. I'm wide awake, though." Luna grinned, and she did look wide awake -- too awake. Madrone wondered if Luna really was sleeping a few minutes earlier. "Nightmares."

"Nightmares," Madrone agreed.

A squawk rang out from under them, and paws scrabbled on rock and gravel. Keith appeared behind them, panting and chest heaving.

"I thought they..." Keith began, but he looked around, and he sighed. "Nevermind."

"We're alright," Madrone said. They gestured to their right side. "C'mon, sit."

Keith hesitated, but he padded over to where Madrone and Luna were laying and settled down.

Luna looked up at the stars. "Hey, Madrone?"

"Hm?"

"You wonder what that big blue star that's always shining is?" She gestured her muzzle toward the star in question.

Madrone licked their lips, trying to recall the story their mother once told them when they were so little. "That's Sirius, the Dog Star. It's the brightest star in the sky. It's always shining, no matter how many stars try to outshine it."

"Huh." Despite the unintelligent reply, Luna looked enamored, staring intently at it. Keith seemed to be fascinated by it, too.

"They say a dog's spirit lives in that star," Madrone went on. "I remember my mother saying his name was Laelaps. He was a really brave dog, the smartest dog my mama had ever seen."

"The Collbrande dogs... they mentioned Laelaps," Keith said. "Did

your mother know him?"

Madrone giggled. "No, silly, she didn't know him. Only special dogs got to meet him. He led all the dogs away after that big explosion killed a bunch of humans. He could speak Human, you know."

Sycamore was a part of the huge pack that became refugees those years ago, wandering for a new home after what Shark called "the Disaster" destroyed theirs. Madrone's mother didn't speak very much about her time with the dogs. Madrone never asked questions. But they started to think. Did Sycamore know Shark? Did Shark know Sycamore? Despite Madrone looking like a spitting image of Sycamore, Shark never asked them about anything.

"A dog that can speak Human." Keith gaped, knocking Madrone out of their thoughts. "No wonder he lives in that star now. He must have been something else."

Yeah, Madrone agreed in silence, exhaustion making them fade a bit, *he must have.*

Chapter Four

[image]

Despite all that had happened the previous day, Keith *wasn't* having an anxiety attack for once. That was probably more surprising than the fact that his and his pack's home was miles away and they were stuck in unknown territory for god knew how long.

The cave was quiet, save for the occasional *drip-drip-drip* of the leftover rain at the mouth of the entrance. A storm passed through the Capital with surprising quickness, leaving lush grass and strengthened plants in its wake. The clouds had dissipated and a long bow of color stretched across the sky. Keith occasionally glanced out to admire its beauty as the cave was beginning to brighten as the sun emerged behind the clouds. The lichen lining the outside of the entrance glimmered in the waning light, flowing lightly with a breeze that gave Keith a bit of a chill. As it blew into the cave, Keith began to sniff on instinct.

Madrone and Luna were in deep sleep beside him. Madrone's head was resting on Luna's round belly, rising and falling softly with shallow breaths. Luna had tucked her nose into the soft moss, practically breathing it in. Keith smiled; he was glad that Madrone wasn't still angry from their tirade the night before. Their comments left Keith reeling a bit. All they went through together-- a lot of it was done so in silence. The silence was peaceful, granted, but now that Keith thought about it, there was a lot he didn't know about Luna and Madrone. He never bothered asking. He thought it would be intrusive: there were things about his friends that screamed bad experiences and it just wasn't right to butt his head in.

Keith blinked through sleepiness and looked down at his paws. He noticed that the ends of his bandages were already frayed beyond repair. How long would they stay on his carpals before they'd fall off and expose the ugly scars of teeth marks beneath? Luna had seen them, and he remembered her flinching when she noticed How would Madrone react? Keith shuddered, his nose twitching.

He picked up a strange odor. It was unlike anything he'd ever smelled before. It smelled vaguely... like a cat? Keith scrunched his face. What was a cat doing in Collbrande? *No*, he thought. *It smells different from a cat.*

"Do you smell that?" Madrone walked up to Keith, locking eyes with him with him. Madrone initiating eye contact was rare. Something was wrong.

"It smells like *shit*, is what it smells like," Luna groused. "Did someone bring a cow into Collbrande?"

Keith was incredulous. "No, stupid, take another whiff."

His friend rolled her eyes and inhaled comically loudly. "It's a cat?"

Madrone stepped in. "You're both stupid. It's a--"

A terrible roar cut through the air.

Luna and Madrone ran outside, much to Keith's dismay. His eyes darted around the mouth of the cave. What was going on? He stepped out to witness something so horrifying and bizarre that it rivaled the fight with the Scouts.

A monster was bounding across the grasslands of Collbrande's Capital at blazing speed. It was almost cat-like in appearance, with light brown fur and blazing green eyes that Keith could detect despite the creature moving in a blur. It howled in rage, exposing a nasty set of canines. Keith cowered at the sight of the creature despite being so far away from it.

"*Gain way!*" An unfamiliar, feminine voice bellowed throughout the marshes. Through the spiraling, Keith's sleep-bleary eyes picked up a blue and white shape giving chase to the enormous beast. The monster caterwauled as dogs bit at its heels to slow it down, to no avail.

"What the hell is that thing?" Keith found himself screaming. He

scrabbled on his paws when the monster started to pivot on its hind legs and make for where Luna and Madrone were standing.

Madrone gulped, unsure of what to do. "It's a mountain lion," they stuttered. "Mama said she used to see them around forests a lot... but they never interacted with dogs. At least..." Their voice became a little shaky. "At least the bigger ones."

Keith felt a brush of fur. It was Luna, cowering against him. "What do they do to the small ones?" she asked.

Madrone didn't answer. Keith could feel his body cowering, too.

In the blink of an eye, the mountain lion's path changed, and Keith let out a whoop of relief. Then, he saw that the cantankerous creature was heading straight for a crowd of dogs, some being puppies with their mothers. Keith's sighthound eyes could catch hunger in the expression of the beast.

A flash of brown was caught in the corner of Keith's eye-- none other than Madrone, barreling after the mountain lion. "*Madrone, stop!*" Keith and Luna both howled after them. But Madrone didn't seem to hear them, as they galloped straight for the mountain lion's behind, falling in line with the rest of the dogs giving chase to it.

A golden shape -- Shark -- went after the commotion, shouting war cries in some kind of attempt to distract the mountain lion. It worked: the mountain lion faced him, and in an incredible act of bravery, Shark was snout to snout with the creature more than twice his size. The blue and white dog leading the charge clamped her jaws down on the mountain lion's tail, and it roared in pain, swiping a paw and knocking Shark off of his feet.

The blue and white dog wasn't fazed by the monster's powerful paws and claws. She signaled for the other dogs following her, one of them being Madrone, to corner the mountain lion against a lone conifer tree. The mountain lion was slowly being backed against the thick, tough bark, and it let out a caterwaul when the splintering hide of the conifer pierced its flesh. As Keith followed Luna to join a crowd of dogs watching the battle, he noticed that the mountain

lion no longer had a look of pure hunger on its face, but a look of terror. The blue and white dog leading the charge looked deep into the wild eyes of the creature, defiant, challenging.

Shark got up off of his feet with a shake of his pelt and barked furiously. "You'll hurt yourself!" he barked.

"I've got this," the blue and white dog assured him. "Dogs! At its hind legs!"

The dogs, not including Madrone, who backed off when the bigger, stronger Guards pushed them away, bit down on the muscular hind legs of the monster. It screeched, and tried to swipe a killing blow at the blue and white dog, but she dodged it with precision. Shark gave a hard shove to the mountain lion's left knee, and the great beast fell to the ground, the subordinate dogs still gripping onto its flesh without a chance of letting go. The blue and white leader-dog -- wait, wasn't Shark supposed to be the leader? -- sunk her teeth into the vulnerable neck of the mountain lion, which was thrashing around to no avail, and she clenched her jaw and pushed until an awful cracking sound echoed across the grasslands. The mountain lion was slain.

As soon as the death rattles of the mountain lion ceased, blood and saliva still seeping from its open maw, Shark and the blue and white merle dog sniffed at each other's flanks, and the Guards dispersed. Keith and Luna caught up to Madrone, who was shaking.

"What happened here?" Shark asked the female, who was some kind of Shepherd dog. Her scent was out of the ordinary -- male. Keith was familiar with female dogs with male scents, though, so he didn't pry. Not like he had the authority to talk to this mysterious dog anyway.

"Another hungry mountain lion on the loose," she replied. She didn't have a single scar or scratch on her pelt, despite referring to that mountain lion as another. Who was this dog? "Tried to go after the pups. The cold affected everyone, I suppose." She glanced at Keith and his pack, brow raised in surprise. "Oh? Are those Angirans?"

Shark huffed. "These are our new refugees. Angiran scout dogs were about to attack them when we saved them."

"Interesting. Well, pleased to make your acquaintance." The blue and white female bowed her head. Her beautiful coat flowed in the spring breeze, adding to her majestic appearance. "I am Ruby, co-Alpha of Collbrande."

"*Co-Alpha?*" Keith blurted. Ruby immediately looked at him. He sputtered and averted her gaze. "I mean... Shark never told us there were two Alphas... Ma'am..."

Now Shark was the one who was sputtering. "I assumed Ruby would have been there last night to introduce herself to you all." He looked at her. "Where were you, love?"

Oh. They were mates. Keith didn't know why he didn't already put that together.

Ruby shook her head. "Training our newest recruitment of Guards. I was working late. That pit bull was giving me some trouble."

Shark made an "*ohhh*" noise. Ruby explained to Keith and his pack, "I am the overseer of the Collbrandi army. Basically, I'm in charge of keeping Angira away from our territory. Nikita may be strong, but I am a more calculated female than she or her mate."

Madrone cocked their head. "Why do you have a male-scent if you're a female?" Keith slapped his paw over their mouth.

But Ruby only shrugged and said, "Scent does not define the dog, little one."

Luna looked around the group of dogs. "Is no one going to talk about how she killed a *giant cat?*"

"I have killed three mountain lions in my time, actually," Ruby chuckled modestly. "They have become quite a problem these past few months as we expand our territory further west. They are pests, those mangy animals. Even more so an issue than coyotes."

"Speaking of territory, that reminds me," Shark said. "I was going to show these three the rest of Collbrande tomorrow."

Ruby smiled. "I'm sure they will fit right in, especially that mutt." She pointed her muzzle at Madrone. "You are tenacious. I admire that."

Madrone wagged their tail. Luna nudged them, chuckling. Keith gave a half-smile.

"We'll deal with the aftermath," Shark said to the small pack. "After everyone's calmed down, why don't you lot make yourselves at home?"

Keith and his packmates were left on their own after the Alphas padded over to the crowd of dogs and puppies. Keith glanced back at the mountain lion, its eyes clouded with death.

--

Socializing with the other Collbrande dogs, Keith realized, wasn't going to be easy. For one, the territory was huge. It was home to enormous packs of dogs of all breeds, some aggressive, some slightly less aggressive. Luna and Madrone were having a chat together in the sun of the Capital's endless grasslands, surrounded by other packs, eating and playing. Keith was wandering around. Making friends would be key to survival in this paradise. Friends meant allies, and if Angira were to attack, which could be at any moment, allies meant battle compatriots.

Why don't you make yourselves at home? Shark said. Sheesh. Like this was being taught how to roll over for a Greenie Bite.

Then,a substantially attractive female mutt walked past him. Jackpot.

"E-excuse me," Keith stuttered, padding up to speed with the female, who didn't even look his way. "Hi, uh." She looked back at him then. *Think of something flirtatious to say, come on, Keith...*

The female, her pelt a beautiful yet scruffy and coarse brown, gave a shake. "Do I know you?" She glanced at his collar and her brow raised. "Are you an Angiran? The hell are you doing here?"

"N-no! I'm not an Angiran! For crying out loud..." Keith groaned. When he looked at the female, she was gazing at him like he had two heads. "Sorry. I uh. Just wanted to say your coat is very pretty. Very nicely taken care of."

"Paws off, sighthound, or I'll maul you like that mountain lion!" A male Doberman stormed in between them, jowls raised in a warning snarl. "I'm having first mate!"

"Woah! Jeez! I didn't wanna *mate* with her!" Keith whined. What kind of barbarians were these?

The female only rolled her eyes. "He wasn't gonna do that, Cedar." Cedar didn't look convinced. In fact, he looked like he still wanted to maul Keith's muzzle off. The female followed the male as he backed off and walked away. She turned to Keith and said, "I'm Snakeberry, by the way."

Snakeberry. That was a nice name. Keith licked his lips dopily as she walked out of sight.

"Keith! Come on, let's go eat!" Luna's voice rang behind him. Keith uttered a, "*Coming!*" before looking back one more time.

--

Keith was curled into his moss-bed for an afternoon nap. The day was only halfway over, and already Keith had learned more about dogs than he ever had at the foster care. He knew that dogs came in different shapes and sizes, sure, but he was totally unaware that dogs could adapt to nature as precisely as the Collbrandi dogs had. Weren't dogs supposed to be dependent on humans? How could a group of dogs as large as this reject humanity and human touch? Didn't they ever miss treats and belly rubs and peanut butter?

Maybe they were like him and Luna. Perhaps humans wronged all these dogs and thus they sought out a getaway after the Disaster... whatever that was. Keith had heard about the Disaster in passing, primarily through Sycamore, but he always shrugged it off as an old wives' tale from the way she explained it. In fact, she always told the story through pursed jowls, and shifty eyes, as though she knew more about it than she was letting on.

Fitting in was a troublesome feat as long as he still had his collar and his human-given name. It's not that he wanted to let those go--they were all he had to remember the good times he had with humans, as little as there were. Maybe it was for the best. Humans were no longer a part of his life. He was a wild dog.

Realizing that a nap wasn't in his body's list of priorities, he glanced groggily at Luna and Madrone, who appeared to be asleep beside him. Madrone was already a wild dog, feral blood coursing through their veins. Luna, however, was just like Keith: a pet dog who wanted to be wild. She and Keith would never have the pedigree of ferality in their bloodstream, but then again, neither did most of the dogs residing in Collbrande. Shark was definitely a former pet dog from the lingering human scent he gave off. So was the co-Alpha, Ruby.

Who were Luna and Keith? Madrone had an identity to their name: a feral dog, born wild and free. So what did that make their packmates?

A loud bark startled Keith out of his thoughts. From the squeaking sound beside him, it startled Luna and Madrone just as much.

"Rise and shine!" Shark was standing at the mouth of the den. He didn't have any other dogs with him, Keith noticed.

"It's not morning, it's the afternoon!" Madrone complained. Keith anticipated an eye twitch or something from Shark, but it never happened.

Shark let out a belly-laugh that echoed off of the cave walls. "So sorry about that." He turned around, big paw raised. Keith noticed

that his pads were cracked and calloused, almost inflamed. "Come on, now, on four legs. It's time to introduce you to your trainers."

"Trainers?" Keith asked. "I thought you told us to make friends here, not be taught obedience."

Shark's jowl twitched. "Not *that* kind of training, boy. Battle training."

At first, Keith felt self conscious that his legs were shaking. But when he looked back with a slight tilt of his head, Madrone and Luna weren't any better.

"Don't be weaklings. Come on." Keith's ear twitched at that, and he hoped Shark didn't see. For his small, beady cherry-eyes, Shark seemed to catch on to a lot.

The small pack followed Shark out to the ravine. The sun was well on its way to its highest point, but it was bright out, sharp yellow light illuminating the trees and the rocks and the vegetation. Keith spotted two big figures casting shadows on part of the ravine's cliffside.

Up on the cliff were the very same Guards that escorted Keith and his packmates to Collbrande: the tricolor hound with the terrible scars on his chest, eyes a sunken amber, as though he'd seen too much in his young life, and the large grey mutt with terrier claws. The rising sun was blinding Keith, but he could feel the gazes of the Guards piercing through his coat.

Viper hopped down each rock with ease, wiry muscles rippling through his body. Keith kind of wished he was in that great of shape. Timberwolf was a bit less graceful, but from the hulking shoulders and hips the mutt had on him, Keith realized that wasn't the purpose of his body.

"Meet your trainers, Viper and Timberwolf." Shark's Guards were poised and almost statuesque, not moving an inch as Shark surveyed them.

"We'll be showing you three the basics of self-defense." Timberwolf explained. He bowed his head before saying to his leader,"we can take the reins now, Sir."

"Excellent." Shark looked serious for a moment. "Remember, the meeting is today."

Meeting? Keith's jaw clenched. What kind of meeting? With who? Anxiety bubbled in his throat-- what if the meeting had to do with his pack? Their staying in Collbrande? Would they be publicly humiliated? Flayed open and their guts eaten while packs upon packs of dogs watched? What if they--

Luna nudged his shoulder. Keith shook his coat, a little annoyed at himself.

Viper and Timberwolf nodded at their Alpha. "Yes, Sir," they said in unison.

Shark dipped his head with a chuffing bark, and he left the Guards and the small pack to their own devices. Viper immediately turned to Luna, singling her out.

"You. Spaniel." He said to her. He gestured with his muzzle to his leg. "Bite my foreleg."

Luna cocked her head. "Huh?"

"Do it. Bite my foreleg. Go on."

Luna hesitated. *Just do it, before he tries to eat you or something*, Keith thought while giving Luna a look. She braced herself, looking at Viper with a calculating gaze, as if she was studying his future pattern of movement. Then she lunged for his left foreleg, but Viper dodged, turning with his pronounced spine and musculature and subsequently kicked Luna off of her paws and sent her tumbling to the grassy ground.

Spluttering, Luna spit grass out of her mouth. Keith winced when he saw a bit of blood at her nose. "What was *that* for?"

Viper shrugged. "I wasn't actually going to let you bite me that easily. Try again."

Meanwhile, Timberwolf made his own presence known, and it was indeed a presence. His shadow in the dawn sun was twice his own enormous size. "Greyhound, mutt. Try attacking my flank."

Oh, jeez. Keith was not looking forward to a bleeding nose, too. "How do you want us to do that?" Keith asked, trying not to sound miserable.

Timberwolf only raised a brow. Keith got the message. Keith and Madrone nodded at each other. Timberwolf was going to dodge their initial double-attack just like Viper did with Luna. They'd have to fight like... well... like how Luna had fought Roxy: with her brain, not her instinct. Her mind's eye, not just with her fangs.

Keith launched first, Madrone delaying their attack by only a blink. Timberwolf made to lunge at Keith, exposing sharp and weathered teeth, but he was caught off guard by the gap in time in which Madrone and Keith attacked. While Keith dodged a swipe from Timberwolf's huge paw, Madrone sunk their fangs into Timberwolf's fur, making him yelp. When he got the chance, Keith did the same.

In the meantime Luna was learning fast, too. It was as though Viper and Timberwolf saw the former pet dogs as stupid, because Viper went for the same dodge-and-kick technique, only for Luna to see through it and clamp down on his upper foreleg. Viper let out a startled howl.

Timberwolf hissed and licked at his flank. He let out a startled laugh. "Not bad."

"Huh." Viper actually had a look of surprise on his long, gaunt face.

"We may be pet dogs," Keith said, "But we're not stupid like them."

Viper and Timberwolf conceded with shrugs. When Luna, Madrone and Keith let up, Viper and Timberwolf confronted them.

"What would you guys say your skillset is?" Timberwolf asked.

Skillset? What did that mean? As in a *pack*, or... "Well, together, we--" Keith started.

"No. Not together. Individually," Timberwolf interrupted.

That was a little trickier to figure out. Keith and his pack did everything together, and Keith did mean everything. When push came to shove in the Black Pine Forest... "I'm fast," he finally answered.

"I-I'm smart, I guess... resourceful..." Madrone offered, though they were stammering. And that was true; Madrone knew more about the plantlife and even just the world around their paws than any dog Keith had ever known, perhaps even more than their own mother.

Then Viper turned to bore his gaze down into a guarded Luna. "What about you?"

It took a moment before Luna managed to mumble, "My fangs are sharp."

"Show us your stuff, then." Viper said, adjusting himself into a defensive position. "Prove your strengths."

Timberwolf did the same. "Come at us."

Keith assumed *not together, one by one*, so he distanced himself a bit from his packmates. Their minds were no longer connected. Keith had to block out their scents, mingled together into one, that he shared with them.

"What do ya think, Timber?"

"I dunno, *sweetheart*. They'd make decent Guards." Timberwolf's voice made Keith shudder. There was a lot they weren't telling him, Luna and Madrone. Were Timberwolf and Viper mates, like Shark

and Ruby? What did Timberwolf mean? Timberwolf sniffed at Madrone, who cringed. "This one would be good for the dens."

"Not a bad choice," Viper humored. He prodded Keith with his nose. "The Greyhound's a quick thinker. He'd do well on the Valley."

Luna licked her nose, looking absolutely terrified. "W-what are you talking about?"

"Shark said this was just battle training!" Madrone whimpered. They were panting, and not only in exhaustion.

Viper scoffed. "Life's about to get pretty damn hard for you three. Shark's a mean old bastard." The way Viper said *mean old bastard* wasn't a jeer-- it was more like a warning.

"Y'see, pups, this is the truth of Collbrande," Timberwolf began. "My human-given name wasn't Timberwolf. I don't even *remember* what my name was before they smashed my head against the side of a rock." Timberwolf leaned in, eyes wild. "Did you know they *went through dogs* to master that little technique?"

What the hell-- what did that even mean? Keith was paralyzed in fear at the image of the bodies of dogs being discarded -- *experimented* on -- by other dogs. How was that even possible?

Viper stepped in as Timberwolf appeared he was about to cry. "I was one of the lucky ones who managed to not forget-- never call me Viper when we're out here. My name is Cahir."

"Shark is a beast. A *monolith* of everything that made the Civilization fall. You keep quiet around him, but you keep your chin up." The tangent Timberwolf and Viper -- no, Cahir -- were going on was making Keith's head spin, and yet they continued.

"Keep your chin up, sure, but get used to the taste of Collbrandi blood." The words came tumbling out of Viper's drooling mouth. His lips were curled in rage.

"Sweetheart, easy," Timberwolf attempted to calm his mate.

"I can speak for myself, Timber." The sickly-sweet pet name was tart in Keith's ears. Viper's growling voice continued on. "*Darkness* fell across the Civilization after Laelaps died. Shark and his cronies picked us up off the rocks and turned us into killers for the purpose of protecting his leadership with no opposition."

That didn't make sense to Keith. Why would Shark seem to treat his Guards with respect, laughing at their jokes and allowing them to eat big kill, if only to turn them into what were essentially slaves?

"They will reap what they sowed." Cahir turned tail to walk away.

"I'm not killing anyone," Luna said matter-of-factly. Viper whipped around.

"You live as a dog on this land, you *kill* as one! There's no such thing as pacifism in this world." Viper snarled in Luna's face, and Keith could smell his rank breath from where Viper was standing in a fighting posture, as though he was facing off against the small Cocker. "You're fooling yourself, whelp."

But Luna faced Viper, defiant. "I'm doing what's best for me."

Before any more action could be taken by Viper, Timberwolf stepped between him and Luna. Luna conceded, and Viper backed off. It appeared that Timberwolf must have been used to Viper's outbursts, because he didn't seem fazed at the sight of his mate's canine teeth.

"Shark preaches that dogs have two options in on this land: they stay and they fight, or they try to leave and get their throat's ripped out." Timberwolf took a step forward, jaw clenched, eyes tight at the edges. "He doesn't know that there's a third option."

"The Rebellion," Timberwolf proclaimed, "is a beautiful parasite growing inside the heart of the super-packs. To our knowledge, Shark and Nikita have no idea it even exists. Ever so slowly our leader -- the true heir to the throne of Laelaps -- has been recruiting dogs of all kinds, from both sides, to aid in the coming fight to unite

the Civilization."

In that moment, Keith's world crumbled once again. Everything they had gained, every ounce of knowledge about the outside world of wild dogs... it was all a lie.

Timberwolf opened his mouth to speak again when his eyes widened and he froze. He immediately bowed his head. Cahir soon followed. Keith, Luna and Madrone turned around to see a battle-scarred Rottweiler with a collar leading an enormous pack of unfamiliar dogs. Her eyes were a piercing blue, and her expression was diplomatic. Her scent was indicative of the Angiran Scouts -- an Angiran.

"Excuse me, Guards," the rottweiler said with a calm voice, "would you kindly escort my Judges and I to Shark?"